



They Can Kiss the Back of My Hand by A Dewd

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Summary: AU in which everything remains the same except for one thing: Mike was out of town during the entirety of season 1. When his friends aren't allowed to tell him what really happened while he was gone, their friendship is pushed to its limits. In the meantime, as soon as Eleven catches sight of Mike, she begins to develop a crush.

1. Chapter 1

Eleven just wanted to go to a rock concert. Was that really too much to ask? Max had been shocked when she'd first admitted it to her, both girls sitting in English class, waiting on the bell to ring. Eleven sat fidgeting in her seat, posture as delicate and feminine as ever, dressed in Nancy's pink hand-me-down sweater and faded jeans.

She'd been trying to work up the courage to ask her only girlfriend to go with her since first period, but the unsettling flutter of her stomach and the way her heart began to race every time the words were about come out of her mouth kept her from actually taking the plunge, fearing she'd mess it up. Of course, she wouldn't have been so anxious if it were just some normal concert.

Finally, she decided that she would just have to live with whatever came out of her mouth. She needed to be at this concert, and she knew she couldn't go alone — if Hopper found out she'd gone anywhere alone she'd get *grounded* again. Really, if Hopper found out she went to a rock concert at all, he'd probably be pretty ornery — or at least more so than usual.

Ornery, she said to herself in her head. *Adjective that means angry or combative*. Her lips twitched into a half-smile of their own accord. She remembered learning that word when scanning through her dictionary to find a suitable way to tell Hop that his behavior had been entirely unacceptable after she'd interrogated him about Joyce Byers. She'd only been trying to convince him that if he loved her, then he should marry her and have babies, like in the movies. He'd gotten all red and spluttery and was angry at her for the rest of the night. Hop could definitely be ornery, but he had a soft side that she suspected she was almost exclusively privy too. He'd always been a good dad to her, grouchy and paranoid as he was.

Clammy hands still balled up in her lap, Eleven cast a quick glance to her left at Max sprawled out in her seat, slouched so far down that it looked more like she'd mistaken her desk for a bed. Her eyes were trained faithfully on the clock, counting down every last minute until the bell.

"Um...hey, Max?" Eleven nearly whispered. Max didn't bother looking over to respond.

"Yeah?" she sighed in misplaced exasperation.

"I want to go to the concert on Friday. At the Hawkins Theater." There. That didn't turn out so bad after all.

Max's eyes narrowed at first, though she didn't look away from the clock. Then, her head tilted in confusion, eyebrows migrating south. Eleven could nearly see the gears turning, meshing together under that remarkably thick shock of fire adorning her hard, stubborn head.

Oh no, she thought. Her thinking face.

"The concert on Friday..." Max mumbled to herself, trying to remember what she'd heard about it. It seemed that Eleven had said something strange enough to finally tear her gaze away from the wall-clock of destiny, because Max looked at her, albeit confusedly. "Isn't that like a rock n' roll show or something?" she asked. "Why would you want to go to that, Ele—" she caught herself, realizing they were still at school. "Jane. Why would you want to go to that, Jane?"

Eleven shrugged as innocently as she could manage. "Because I like rock," she said.

Max ran a hand through her semi-tamed mane of hair, thinking. "Yeah, I mean, I guess I know that you like The Clash and whatever else was on that mixtape Jonathan gave you. But I don't know that you'd actually like a rock *concert*, Jane. Do you know anything about them?"

"They play music. Like on albums, but they play it in real life, right in front of you. With instruments."

"That's the gist of it," Max conceded. "But those shows are usually *loud* — like *really loud*. And usually everyone there is wasted. Anyway, we're talking about a concert in *Hawkins*, not like Chicago or something. I didn't hear anything about the one on Friday, but it's probably just another trash local band that can't play worth a damn. No one good ever comes here."

Eleven was sure she probably looked disappointed, but it wasn't because Max was actually managing to dissuade her. She just really wanted her friend to be on board for this. So, she summoned all the enthusiasm she could and tried to look excited. It wasn't that hard to do when she thought about the real reason she wanted to go. There was no way this band could be *trash*.

"Oh. Well that sounds fun!" she said. She had to admit, the way Max had described rock concerts did not sound very fun. But maybe this one would be different. It *would* be different. It would be different because of—

"How did anything I just said sound fun to you, Jane?" Max sighed, sitting up and lowering her voice. "We're supposed to be watching out for you, making sure people don't get too close, not hauling you off to shifty concerts where there'll be loads of people and plenty opportunity for something to happen. Not to mention the fact that the Chief would kill me if he found out I exposed Little Miss Innocent to the world of sex, drugs, and rock n' roll."

There was that word again: sex. Eleven was beyond frustrated by this one word. All she wanted was to be like her friends, to understand all the things they did so she could talk like a normal girl. The problem was that everyone always got uncomfortable when she asked about sex — and that had always hurt her a bit, because she felt like she was doing something wrong.

Usually, whenever she asked Hop or her friends what something means, they're happy to help, all gentle and eager and willing to teach her something new.

Sex, clearly, was different. All she had about this forbidden topic were the few things she'd been able to glean from people's reactions when she asked about it, and a few things she'd heard girls talking about at school.

It occurred to her now, though, that she had never thought to ask Max — at least, not that she could remember.

"Max, what is sex?" she said tentatively.

Max had gone back to looking at the clock, but, as Eleven had suspected, the redhead's gaze snapped to her at the mention of sex, eyes wide.

"Everyone but me knows, but nobody will tell me," El mourned, hoping Max would understand. "Hopper even crossed it out of the dictionary at home. He gets red and forgets how to talk normal when I ask about it."

Max laughed sharply at that. "Wow. He really is sheltering you, isn't he? I don't get what the big deal is, anyway. You're *sixteen* now, I think you should know these things. How did he avoid telling you about sex when you had your first period? Did he explain anything to you?" she asked.

"He had Joyce come over. She explained some things to me. But...you're saying sex has something to do with my period?" Eleven asked, truly perplexed now.

Max looked uncomfortable. "Um...kind of, I guess. But I really don't want to be the one to explain this to you, so — you should just ask Joyce to tell you everything. I'm sure she will as long as you ask when Hopper's not around. I think the only reason she hasn't told you sooner is to spare him a heart attack. Otherwise, I know you missed sex ed by a year, but we'll be taking anatomy next semester. You'll learn more then."

"Oh," Eleven replied. Max sighed in relief and looked back at the clock as she seemed to drop the subject until, "So people will be sexing at the concert?"

Max's head whipped back around, flaming hair fanning out dramatically. "*What?*" was all she managed at first. After fumbling for but a second, she got the rest out. "No! People won't be — I mean, at least I *hope* nobody will be sexi—" she stumbled, slowing down to correct herself. "*Having sex*. That's how you say it, by the way. Having sex. And no, people won't be. Why would you think that?"

In all honesty, Eleven had guessed that from the way people talked about sex that it was just another one of those things that wasn't done in public — like changing clothes, or going to the bathroom. She'd

had to get used to the idea of *privacy* after she got out of the lab.

She could still remember the night when the shower wouldn't turn on and she'd called Hopper for help. He had barged right in assuming she was still dressed and had quite the fit because, "WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU CALL ME IN HERE WHEN YOU'RE BUCK ASS NUDE?"

People got weird whenever sex was mentioned, just like people got weird about nudity and private parts and whatever else. So she had figured it was a privacy thing. But Max had confused her.

"You said you'd get in trouble with Hop if you take me to the concert because it would expose me to sex," Eleven reminded her.

"Oh, jeez . . . okay. At least that came from somewhere that made sense. I was just exaggerating. People won't actually be having sex, but rock music has always just kind of been associated with sex, I guess. I don't know why. You don't need to worry about it. I don't really think it's a good idea to go to the concert anyway, Jane."

"Oh," was all Eleven said before the bell rang and Max sprang out of her seat.

"Now, are we getting out of here or are you just gonna sit there and look pouty all day? You know your puppy dog face doesn't work on me," Max said, throwing her backpack over one shoulder.

"I do *not* have a puppy dog face," Eleven mumbled indignantly as she rose from her seat and attempted to keep up with Max, who was cutting through the crowd of students funneling out the door. She finally caught up with her as she stopped to open her locker. "Still want to go," Eleven said more firmly. "To the concert," she added when Max gave no reply.

Max finished retrieving her books and closed her locker. "Why do you wanna go so bad?" she asked. "Didn't I scare you off with my description? You know, alcohol, puke, ear-bleed inducing music, random sweaty boys trying to touch you because they're drunk — doesn't really seem like your scene, Jane. And I swear, I'm not trying to be mean or anything, I just — I don't wanna see anything happen to you."

Eleven sighed, but could feel her mouth curving upward just the barest bit. She'd never grow tired of feeling cared for, even after four whole years living outside the lab.

"You sound like Hopper," she said.

Max rolled her eyes. "Let's not make that comparison."

After stopping by Eleven's locker, they made their way out the front doors and started to head for the underclass' parking lot. Max had just started to drive, and she often gave Eleven rides to and from school. They were usually together anyway.

"So really, why do you want to go to this concert so bad? You've never shown interest in going to any before," Max said, striding up to her car.

They were standing by the car now, but neither one of them were getting in. Max was waiting on Eleven's response, determined to figure this out, and Eleven was staring at the ground and . . . blushing? Definitely blushing.

"Who's playing, anyway?" Max prompted at her friend's silence.

Eleven muttered something nearly inaudible, still far too interested in the pavement.

"What was that?" Max asked.

Eleven huffed, barely looking up and wishing for something to hide her face. "Mike's band," she said.

"Oooooohh, the fabled Mike Wheeler. It all makes perfect sense now," Max said, rolling her eyes and getting into her car.

Eleven opened the passenger door and slid slowly into her seat, now settling for staring at her white Converse sneakers since she was robbed of the pavement. She hadn't wanted to tell Max that Mike was the real reason she wanted to go. She knew there'd be almost no chance of going now. So she sat looking dejected and hopeless, hugging her history textbook to her body as if those that came before her would understand her struggle and comfort her. In reality, the

edge was digging into her ribs.

All of her friends knew she had a *thing* for Mike Wheeler. They had quickly come to call it an *obsession*, but she remained that that was too strong of a word. She wasn't obsessed, she just — really liked Mike. And she couldn't fully explain why, seeing as she didn't even know him. She'd had a grand total of one conversation with him. Two if you counted when she'd said "hi" to him in the hallway, but she didn't think she had said it loud enough for him to even hear, and he hadn't looked her way. The other instance hardly counted either, since the only time she'd worked up the nerve to introduce herself to him at lunch, she'd been cut off by a mob of girls trying to swarm him.

According to her friends, Mike was "a total douche" and "a traitorous bastard, at that." Lucas and Dustin had explained everything to her a couple years back when she'd first started going to school. They had all gone over to the Byers' house after school to play Dungeons & Dragons, but Eleven just couldn't stay focused. She couldn't stop thinking about the pretty, unruly haired boy who sat across the room from her in science class. *Mike*, she remembered from when the teacher called attendance. He had these things all over his face that looked like the stars spread out across the night sky — *freckles*, Max had told her they're called and, "I have them too. How have you seriously not noticed?" And he did this thing with his eyebrows whenever he was really concentrating on a problem, and Eleven always found herself sinking into her seat and sighing "like a cliché little schoolgirl," Dustin would tell her later.

Her friends were not happy when she'd told them the reason she couldn't concentrate that afternoon. They had quickly diagnosed her affliction as a *crush* and assured her that it was normal, especially for someone their age, but "why couldn't it be anyone else, Eleven?"

The story went something like this . . .

Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Will had been best friends for a long time. They all shared similar interests in D&D, Star Wars, video games, and science, among other things. It was a no brainer that they were meant to be friends. They all knew what it was liked to be picked on

by the other kids at school, and they relied on each other. So they had formed their party, each boy taking up a different role based on their D&D characters. Any member of the party would do anything for another; it was common knowledge, and it was the rule of law, besides.

Mike had been in Chicago visiting family when Will went missing. He'd taken the opportunity to get away from school for a little while, going with Holly and his mom to stay with her side of the family. Nancy had stayed at home with his dad for fear of her GPA dropping even a hundredth of a point.

When Will suddenly disappeared, Dustin and Lucas had resolved that they needed to do their part in helping to find him since the police didn't seem to be making any real progress. And on one, fateful, stormy night, they had stumbled across a drenched, terrified girl sporting a shaved head and dressed in nothing but an oversized t-shirt.

What followed that night was something of a nightmare for all involved. The discovery of Will's (fake) body and his funeral; Barbara Holland's disappearance; Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan's fight with an inter-dimensional monster; Joyce and Hopper's trip into the Upside Down to save Will; Eleven's last stand against the bad men and the Demogorgon.

After it was all over, Hopper had been exceedingly clear with everyone. No one else could know that Eleven existed, at least for the foreseeable future. *No one*. And with that, he'd taken her to live with him in the old cabin that the boys would be allowed to visit every so often.

There was a problem with Hopper's "tell no one" plan. Telling no one would mean that they couldn't tell Mike. The boys had confronted the Chief about it, because surely, he'd be okay with them telling Mike. He was a member of the party. He wouldn't tell a soul or he'd be banished by rule of law.

"If any one of you tells Mike Wheeler about Eleven, or *anything* at all that happened while he was gone, you're gonna be in deeper shit than you can imagine. Understand?" had been Hopper's response. He

would take no chances where Eleven's safety was concerned. He'd made them all promise, one by one.

True to their word, when Mike got back, they didn't tell him a single thing about what had really happened. They tried to let things go back to normal. But naturally, that could only last so long. All Mike was told was that Will had gotten lost in the woods and been found days later, nearly dead from the cold. Nothing more.

He'd found this explanation too vague for his liking, but he eventually let the details drop, figuring it was just too soon for everyone to talk about it. Sometimes he'd notice subtle things that were different about his friends after the incident — like the way that one of them would say something and they'd all share glances like they were being reminded of something unpleasant. Or the fact that they seemed to have acquired far too many inside jokes in the short period of time that he was gone. Or the way that they always seemed so worried about where Will was, and how they coddled him far more than usual. Some of those things made sense, given what he'd heard they'd been through.

But some things didn't make sense. He'd often find out that his friends were doing things without him — leaving him behind. They wouldn't even tell him what they were up to. Even when he was with them, sometimes they'd all look at each other like they wanted to talk about something, but then they'd all look back at Mike and decide against it. He wasn't stupid. He knew there were things they weren't telling him. It hurt that they apparently didn't trust him enough to let him in.

When he left a room they all talked in rapid, hushed voices, but when he came back they all shut up immediately. Sometimes they would all go off together for a whole day after school and not even tell him what they were doing. They would give lame excuses like they all had homework or they were grounded, but he knew better. They hardly ever even bothered to ride their bikes off in the direction of their houses.

Mike couldn't help but feel angry with them. These were his best friends — really, they were his only friends — and they were cutting him off. He found himself alone more and more often, and eventually

realized that he didn't take the same joy from hanging out with them that he used to. He used to feel happy and recharged after spending time with them, relieving all of the stress of school and just being carefree. Now he found that he was getting more bitter every time he was around them, because they never failed to jilt him or cut him out of a conversation somehow. He felt like he didn't even really know his friends anymore and it was beyond frustrating.

This went on for a few months before he boiled over. They had just gotten out of school on a Friday and Mike had been planning what they could do with the rest of their day. He had settled on asking if everyone wanted to get takeout from Benny's and watch some movies at his house. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew this question would be infinitely more important than the words themselves could ever convey; he had been hurt and rejected too many times, and this was their last chance to prove that they still wanted to be his friend.

Dustin had been the one to reply. He always came up with the worst excuses. "Ah, you know what, Mike? We must've forgotten to tell you that we actually all have—" and he had paused, obviously glancing to Lucas for help, who had just shrugged. "Dentist appointments," Dustin finished. "We all have . . . uh, dentist appointments."

Mike's entire body had gone rigid with anger. It took him to the count of three to relax enough to reply. He made a sarcastically thoughtful face. "Dentist appointments, huh? Okay, so like you all scheduled your dentist appointments on the same day at the same time, alright, that's cool, that makes total sense. I guess I just have one question, then."

"Uh-huh?" Dustin asked, his voice cracking nervously.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU GUYS?" He yelled in their faces, turning and storming toward the bike rack, riding home shaking with anger.

The boys had given him the weekend to cool off and tried to apologize when they saw him at school, but that conversation had gone horribly. It was hard to fix something like that when they couldn't really explain to him why everything was so broken in the

first place. They could only continue to give lame excuses.

They had all thought that Mike would cool down and come back to them with time, but every day they tried to talk to him or invited him to something, he ignored them completely. Day after day went by until all of a sudden, it had been months since Mike had even so much as looked at any of them. And just like he had grown bitter with them, they grew bitter with him.

That was around the time that Mike started hanging out with the "cool" crowd, growing his hair out longer and messier, wearing leather and denim jackets like some kind of rockstar. He was constantly growing, eventually shooting up past six feet and even sprouting some facial hair that definitely made him look just a little older than his mere sixteen years of age.

In all of the spare time he had without his former friend group, he'd even picked up playing the guitar, finding out he was actually something of a natural, and could sing pretty well to boot.

In short, Mike Wheeler had become the very thing that none of the original party ever thought they would be: the most popular guy in school. He had turned out more handsome, stylish, and talented than anyone would have imagined. And it didn't even hurt him that he still had the best GPA in his class. It looked like that would remain a Wheeler trademark.

Of course, this only fueled the feud between the former friends. The boys despised that Mike had become the very thing they could never be — and they would never admit it, but they were jealous. Well, maybe Will wasn't so jealous, but he had always been the most level-headed of the group, and he wasn't nearly as angry with Mike as Dustin and Lucas were. Will would have been ready to patch things up if Mike had been.

But it never happened, and Eleven remained an absolute secret.

After *another* horrifying incident with a creature from the Upside Down they had dubbed the "Mind Flayer," Max had come into the fold and become a member of the party, and Eleven had finally become official, acquiring a birth certificate through Dr. Owens with

the promise that she'd be able to go to school in a year.

And so, Eleven had discovered Mike Wheeler. Her best friends' former best friend and Nancy's younger brother. How could such a pretty person exist in all the universe? The boys had assured her that he was nothing special and that he was a "douche" now, but he didn't seem that way to her. Dustin and Lucas had told her the whole story, but she could tell they were still angry about what had happened, so she asked Max, hoping for a more honest version.

Max had explained to her that she hadn't been around when the fallout with Mike happened since she'd moved to Hawkins the year after Eleven escaped the lab. But that meant she was totally removed from the situation, and wasn't swayed by emotions.

"Honestly, I can't blame Mike at all for his reaction," Max had told her. "A guy can only take so much neglect from his best friends. It wasn't fair to him at all, but at the same time, the guys were just trying to protect you and keep their promise to Hopper. It was a bad situation, and plain bad timing that Mike was out of town when everything went down."

"Really, I'm just surprised that the boys were so serious about keeping their promise. Usually they're pretty shit about that kind of stuff. But, then again, it is *your* safety on the line. And they'd do anything for you. So I guess it kind of makes sense. I just wish there'd been a better outcome. Mike doesn't seem all that bad."

Eleven had been more satisfied with this explanation than the boys' version. At least Max had tried to understand what Mike must have been feeling and didn't call him a douche. He definitely didn't seem like a douche. He seemed really nice — like, *really* nice. She could still remember that day in the ninth grade when she'd been getting something out of her locker and there was a loud *clang* not ten feet off to her left. She'd looked over to see the school bully, Troy, holding a much smaller boy against the lockers. He'd stripped the boy's backpack off of him and unzipped it, dumping all the contents on the ground and beginning to trample them before Mike had come out of nowhere and rammed into him with his shoulder, knocking the bully to the ground.

"The hell is wrong with you, Troy? What'd he do, look at you funny?" Mike had said before stooping to help the boy pick up his things, doing his best to salvage crushed assignments and dust off all the dirt.

That wasn't the only time Eleven had witnessed his kindness. She'd since seen him tutoring other students, lending strangers money for lunch, inviting loners to sit at his table. He was like the school's guardian angel. For some reason she just couldn't seem to work up the courage to approach him on her own.

She was still insecure about her comparatively lacking speaking skills, even though she was learning fast. And her friends certainly wouldn't help her even if she asked. Their job was to make sure people didn't get too close to her, not help her expose herself. And the fact that it was Mike — needless to say, the boys would not be helping her there. And Max agreed with Hopper that she shouldn't get too close to other people. Still, she couldn't help the feeling she got whenever she thought about him or saw him.

"You really want to go, don't you?"

Eleven refocused on the present, looking to Max who had her eyes on the road, driving along.

"Eleven?" Max prompted when she said nothing. "Do you really want to go see Mike play?" The redhead looked over at her and she nodded earnestly. Max sighed. "Okay," she said.

Eleven's eyes widened. "Okay?"

"Okay," Max confirmed, laughing at her now.

Max had no idea what she could be getting herself into, but Eleven gave her the most genuine, heart-warming smile she'd ever received and she decided it would be worth it.

2. Chapter 2

Hey everyone. Thanks for all of the positive feedback on chapter 1. I always appreciate reviews, whether positive or critical. I just wanted to let you know that I do plan to follow this story through to its conclusion, so I will be doing my best to update on an at least somewhat regular basis. I know what it's like to become invested in a story that never gets finished, so I don't want to do that to anyone. Conversely, I hope you'll all understand if updates aren't always posted super quickly. I'm a full time college student with a part time job among other commitments, and as we all know, life will go on.

I honestly appreciate everyone that reads this story, and if you enjoy it, hate it, have a question, or even just a thought, I'd be honored if you dropped a review.

Lastly, I haven't written on this site in a little while, and my previous username was bothering me so I changed it. Hopefully that didn't confuse anybody.

Hope you enjoy.

Best,

A Writer

"That is the worst idea I've heard in a long time — maybe ever."

Max was beginning to regret asking the boys to help her. Especially Dustin, since he tended to be just a bit dramatic. He was up and pacing around the Byers' living room now, mumbling something about "utter incompetence" and asking if he was the only one sticking to the "post-incident decompression matrix." He was the only one who called it that.

Lucas was getting agitated. "Dude, would you sit down and shut up already? We get it, you think it's a bad idea, but—" he paused, motioning to Dustin's still rapidly moving feet. "Totally *not* helping,"

he finished.

Dustin stopped abruptly, staring at Lucas incredulously. "So you think it's a *good* idea?"

"I didn't say that! I just told you to stop pacing."

"Why are you not explicitly denying that you think it's a good idea Lucas? Huh? Sounds to me like you're on board with—"

"I didn't say I was on board with anything! You were seriously just annoying me! Because you're annoying!"

Dustin drew a breath to respond, but Max was finished with them. "ALRIGHT, ENOUGH!" she yelled. "You two bozos would argue forever and a day if I weren't here to stop you. *Honestly*," she griped, dragging a tired hand down her face. She waited to see if Dustin and Lucas would actually listen to her, somewhat surprised when Dustin obediently hushed up and collapsed in a chair and Lucas sat back, crossing his legs. She looked to Will. The slighter boy had been sitting quietly and observing the whole ordeal, as usual.

"Will, what do you think?" she asked him. "You haven't said anything yet."

He was silent for a moment before he replied. "I'm usually one to be cautious, but to be completely honest, a concert doesn't sound like the most dangerous thing we could take Eleven to. Everyone will be focused on the music; it's not like it's a dinner party or something. She won't need to talk to anybody, so nobody should get suspicious of her. Besides, even if people do talk to her, I think it's about time we lighten up and let her live a little. She can talk just fine, she won't give herself away. She's smart."

Max nodded enthusiastically, looking at Will and trying to send him a telepathic *thank you*. That boy was always there when she needed his support. He cared about all of his friends, and he knew Eleven was dying to be let off the leash. She wanted to be a normal girl and to do normal teenage things, and Max sensed that Will would help her do that if it made her happy.

But all of a sudden Dustin was back on his feet again. "Son of a bitch, Will, not you too!" He looked to Lucas for support, only to see that he was stroking his chin contemplatively. "Oh, don't tell me..."

"He's kind of got a point, man. We can't keep Eleven away from people forever. And what could go wrong at a concert, anyway?" Lucas asked.

Dustin gaped at him. "Um, gee, I don't know, let's see...how about the bad men find out that we're taking her out somewhere public besides school because they probably still have this whole town bugged? And how about they pretend to be concert-goers, but kidnap Eleven? How about that, Lucas?"

Lucas just shook his head. "Dude, you are seriously paranoid. Nothing's gonna happen."

"Paranoid? *Paranoid?*!" Dustin looked over at Will. "Did he just call me paranoid?" Will just raised his hands in an *I'm staying out of this* gesture, so Dustin went back to the offender. "After everything that happened two years ago, and the year before that, you're going to call me paranoid for being cautious?"

Lucas raised a finger to reply, but floundered for words, deflating after a couple seconds. "You have a fair point," he said.

"Thank you!" Dustin said, gesturing to Lucas and smiling at the others as if this had solved everything.

To the group's collective surprise, Will sat forward and spoke, seeming more fired up than usual. "Listen, guys, I know none of us want anything bad to happen to Eleven — God knows she's been through enough — but at some point we're going to have to stop babying her and let her live her life. That doesn't mean we stop watching out for her, and that doesn't mean we stop caring for her like we do, but it does mean that we give her a little freedom and room to breathe."

He paused, but the rest of the party stayed silent, sensing he had more to say. "It's just...I kind of know what it's like, you know? Especially after the second incident, my mom would hardly let me

out of her sight. And of course I love her, but not being able to go places I want to go without supervision, not being able to be alone, not being able to just be a *normal* guy...it gets to be kind of suffocating. And at some point, it had to come to an end, or I promise, I would've gone crazy. But it's been some time, and things are better now. So I think we need to let things be better for Eleven, too. And if she wants us to be there for her, we should be there for her. Because she's always been there for us."

Dustin sat back down in his chair dejectedly, slapping his hands over his face. "Son of a bitch, Will. How am I supposed to top that?"

Max smiled and grabbed him by the shoulder. "You can't. And if she's going to the concert, you're going to be there for her, right Dustin?"

Dustin groaned, hunching forward and looking around the room like he'd been betrayed. "If something happens, let the records show that I tried," he said.

Max clapped him on the back. "Good man. Everyone else in?"

Will smiled and nodded. Lucas threw his hands up in surrender. "Sure. Why not?"

Max beamed, but then she remembered something. Her smile faltered slightly. *How to go about this...* "Alright, I need a solemn oath from all of you. Everyone give me a spit swear that you'll be there tomorrow night."

Will and Dustin grimaced, but they all spit and shook, one by one.

"Alright, good stuff, boys. I knew I could count on you," Max said, walking to the door. "I'm headed to Eleven's for a sleepover. I'll see you all in the morning. And then after school...it's concert time." She opened the door, slipping halfway out but stopping to look back at them. "You guys never asked who was playing tomorrow," she said.

Lucas shrugged. "I don't know many rock bands anyway. Especially not local ones. Who's playing?"

Max smirked. "Mike's band," she said, receiving nothing but silence and confused, blank stares back.

Eventually, Dustin piped up. "What?" he said.

"Okay, bye!" Max replied cheerily, stepping outside and shutting the door behind her, jogging to her car so they wouldn't follow and ask her questions.

She loved the guys, but the whole grudge with Mike Wheeler was stupid. She didn't feel that bad about swindling them into this one.

On Friday, Eleven was having a hard time focusing on school. She winced slightly when she remembered Mr. Rigsby calling on her in Algebra 2 earlier that day. She'd been resting her head over her arms on the desk, her foot tapping restlessly on the tiled floor as it still was now, lost in thoughts about the concert that night. He had asked her to remind the class of the value of pi, but she'd been so zoned out and unprepared that her immediate response had been, "I haven't been to the grocery store in a while so I don't know what the value of a pie is." Even as she finished saying it, she realized that she was, in fact, in math class and that probably hadn't been what he was asking. A few students had laughed but Mr. Rigsby hadn't thought it was very funny.

The day dragged by, second by sluggish second until she finally sat next to Max in their last period, waiting for the bell to ring. Max was in her traditional position, slouched so far down that she looked to be on the verge of slipping out of the chair entirely, flopping onto the ground. She stared (of course) at the clock. "Would you stop tapping your foot, Jane? You're driving me crazy."

Eleven stopped, realizing for the first time that she'd even been tapping her foot. "Sorry," she said, looking over to Max. "I'm nervous."

Max sat up. "What are you nervous for?"

"The concert, I guess," Eleven replied, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Max leaned forward, elbows on her desk. "Because Mike's gonna be there?"

"Yes, but...I want to talk to him. And I'm nervous about it."

Max was quiet for a bit. "You know you might not be able to talk to him, right? After the show, people are probably gonna swarm him. That's if he even sticks around afterwards. He's playing the Hawkins Theater, not some bar, so he could just go backstage and leave out the back."

Eleven was disheartened by this, and it must've shown on her face because Max reached for her arm. "It'll be okay, Jane. You'll get to talk to him eventually." She smiled back at her friend in thanks, and the bell rang. They both hopped up, and after a visit to each of their lockers, they headed for Max's car. Soon they were driving to Eleven's house to get ready for the concert.

When Eleven had started attending school, Hopper had seen no reason to keep living in the cabin on the outskirts of Hawkins. And he had wanted something better than his old trailer for her, so he'd cleaned it out and sold it to old Sam Rogers, who'd wanted it for its already convenient placement by the lake. The old man was an avid fisher.

He and Eleven had packed up their things and moved into a cozy townhouse near what locals called "Downtown Hawkins," even if it wasn't much of a downtown. He'd let Joyce help Eleven with the decorations to make it feel more homey, and they'd all been pleased with the outcome. The little house had turned into a nice, warm home, and Eleven was absolutely ecstatic that she was so much closer to her friends and to all of the nice stores and restaurants. Hopper sometimes missed the peace and quiet of the cabin, but Hawkins wasn't all that busy of a town anyway. It wasn't so bad.

Max pulled into the empty driveway, the Chief being out at work — if you wanted to call it work. Hopper had once told Eleven that if there wasn't an inter-dimensional threat, his job was to sit back and get fat. Hawkins was the very definition of uneventful. Although he'd said that halfway jokingly; he spent a lot of his time on duty these days trying to ensure that all forms of illegal government surveillance were shut down after the loons at Hawkins Lab left, and keeping a watchful eye out for anything out of the ordinary. This meant paying close attention to even the trivial matters. He had learned his lesson

with the dead pumpkin patches the year the Mind Flayer had attacked.

The girls walked into the house, Eleven telekinetically unlocking and locking the door back. There had been a day shortly after they moved into the house that, after school, Eleven had walked into Hopper's office at the station in tears, scaring him half to death. He'd shot up immediately and wrapped her in a hug. "Hey, hey, kid, what's wrong?" he'd asked.

"I'm so sorry, Hop," she'd said, looking up at him reluctantly. "I lost the key."

"The key..." Hopper had mumbled, still puzzled. "Oh! To the house?" Eleven had nodded her head morosely. "Sooooo, you lost the key and biked all the way over to the station to tell me?" Hopper asked, still a little unsure of what the big deal was.

Eleven backed off of him a little bit. "Well, I couldn't get in the house, so I had to come here. But I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Wait, what do you mean you couldn't get in? You can unlock doors with your damn mind. I only gave you that key 'cause I thought it'd be symbolic or something. You know, make it feel like the house belongs to you, too."

Eleven's mouth had formed an "o," before she looked down, embarrassed. "I forgot I could unlock the door," she mumbled.

Hopper had laughed. "C'mon, kid. Lemme drive you back home."

At least she wouldn't forget again. She often smiled while unlocking her front door now, remembering that day.

The girls walked in and went straight back to Eleven's room, dropping their bags on the floor. "Alright," Max said, straight down to business as usual. "What do you want to wear?" Eleven looked down at her clothes. Many of her clothes were still hand-me-downs from Nancy that she adored. She thought Nancy was the prettiest, and her clothes were pretty too. Plus, she was Mike's sister, so that counted for something. Today, though, she was wearing a striped shirt with a

stylish denim skirt that Nancy and Joyce had helped her pick out at the mall. She didn't see why she couldn't just wear that to the concert.

"Can I not wear this?" she asked.

Max shrugged. "I mean sure, you can wear whatever you want. I just thought you might want to look a little edgier or something, since we're going to a rock show," she said, opening Eleven's closet to assess their arsenal. She turned back to Eleven, grinning. "Mike always wears leather jackets and stuff, right? He might be into that kind of thing."

Eleven perked up. "You think?"

Max laughed. "Look at you — so eager." She pulled out Eleven's leather motorcycle jacket that had been a parting gift from her sister Kali the last time she'd visited. They still didn't see eye to eye on things, but they'd somewhat managed to patch things up before Kali had left for Washington State on another mission. Eleven didn't know if she'd ever see her again.

Max threw the jacket on the bed, next pulling out a Led Zeppelin t-shirt that she'd helped Eleven alter. They'd made it into a bit of a halter top, but the high waisted denim skirt would ensure that her stomach wasn't exposed. "Okay," Max said. "The skirt and leggings you have on are fine. Adorable as usual, actually," Max said in feigned annoyance. "Honestly, how do you make everything look so cute? It's annoying." Eleven just laughed.

"You're cute too, Max. Lucas thinks so," she said.

Max blushed. "Alright, enough of that. Let's get you dressed. Throw on the shirt and the jacket."

Eleven did as she was told, then walked over to look in the mirror on her dresser, Max behind her. To Kali's credit, the jacket fit her perfectly. It fell down to the point right above her hips. It complimented the skirt really well, and obviously went great with the shirt.

"Un-freaking-believable," Max said. "You're disgusting."

Eleven whipped around to look at her, feeling hurt before she remembered, "Oh, right. Sarcasm." That had been a tough one for her to learn, and she still had trouble with it.

"Yeah, sarcasm. You're hot, dude. What the hell?"

Rather than respond to that, Eleven decided to ask a question of her own. "What are you going to wear?"

"I've got some stuff in my overnight bag," Max said. "But that's not important. Tonight's about *you*, and you look totally drop dead."

"Bitchin'," Eleven said.

Max smirked. "Bitchin'," she said back.

3. Chapter 3

"The boys should be here any minute," Max said, checking her watch. "At least they promised me they would be." Eleven was sure that Max was telling her this more for her own comfort than anything else. The redhead looked downright fidgety sitting in the parking lot of the Hawkins Theater, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel and looking at the street every few seconds to check for Lucas' car. The reality of their situation must have finally been hitting her. Compared to everything else they'd dared to do with Eleven so far, this was a monumental step. It was a huge event outside of school where there would be — if the packed parking lot was any indication — tons of people.

Sure, her friends had taken her to restaurants, movies, the library — she'd been out in public plenty, but this was different. There was no way of knowing what could happen if they all happened to be separated in the chaos of the concert. Eleven knew it was a risk. Never before had she tempted the bad men so openly. Here was a golden opportunity for them to take her away again, if they were paying attention at all. But she'd decided that she was done living under their shadow. She wanted to know for certain. Were they still out there? Were they still watching her? Watching her friends? Tonight was a test. If they were watching her, then they could come. She'd welcome them — and she'd do everything in her power to ensure that they never harmed her or her friends again.

"Finally," Max huffed as Lucas pulled into the parking lot, obviously relieved that she wouldn't be alone in watching Eleven's back. She threw open her door and stepped out, slamming it behind her. Eleven followed her lead, watching as Lucas circled the lot, eventually snagging one of the last open spots in the back. The girls strolled slowly to the front of the theater, giving the boys time to catch up with them.

Hawkins Theater was the only real musical venue in town, and it was something of a prized possession to the locals. Built in the 1950s, it boasted a tiered, three section seating arrangement with standing room up near the stage, as well as a balcony full of more seats. It was

known for its retro vibe and its full service bar near the back of the first floor. Walking to the front doors now, Eleven could hear the dull, resonant pulse of a guitar and the thudding bass of a drum-set even through the concrete walls of the building. "Did we miss the start?" she asked Max.

Max checked her watch for the fiftieth time that hour. "Nah," she said. "Must be sound check or something." Eleven nodded. She didn't know what a sound check was, but she pieced it together on her own, too preoccupied with her own thoughts to ask. They heard footsteps nearing on the pavement behind them and turned around to see the boys, good as their word. Max smiled despite herself. "Didn't know if you nerds would show up. Good to see you," she said.

"You're an ass, Max, but lucky for you, we keep our promises," Dustin said, shooting her a mildly accusatory glare.

"You know we would've come even if you'd told us that Mike was playing beforehand, right?" Will asked, smirking at her.

"Ehhh," Lucas interjected. "Speak for yourself," he said, though he smiled and bumped shoulders with Max.

Eleven gave them each a quick hug, silently thanking them for their support, face stuck in a grin of nervous excitement.

"Alright," Dustin began. "So here's the plan. Each of us will post up at a predetermined vantage point to—"

"Dustin," Max snapped, cutting him off. "We're at a concert, dude, not in a James Bond film. Relax, have fun, and keep an eye out." She turned to address the group. "Everyone ready?"

The remainder of the party nodded and hummed in agreement, and they walked in together, Dustin trailing behind, mumbling something to himself about constant disregard for his "bomb-ass plans."

Eleven walked with her friends through the second set of double doors that opened into the back of the venue. Immediately, she was shocked by how many people were there — were all of these people here to see Mike play? Were there even this many people in all of

Hawkins? The place was teeming with people, and she couldn't help but feel a little overwhelmed. She'd never seen so many people in one place before, and the din was unbelievable.

There was still the occasional strum of a guitar, the crash of a cymbal, the low growl of a bass coming from the stage as the instruments were all checked and readied for the show. The thick red curtain remained drawn, though, so no one could see anything.

The folks in the auditorium would have already been talking rather loud on account of that unspoken law that dictates the volume of all public events: the one for which everyone progressively talks louder to compensate for the rising volume of the room at large, consequently increasing the overall volume themselves until every last person is shouting for no reason at all. This, compounded with the fact that they were already speaking over the erratic interjection of the instruments, made for a clamor that Eleven had never experienced. This wasn't the low roar before the start of a play, or the steady, subdued murmur of a busy restaurant. This was something else entirely. It felt electric.

Max prodded her with an elbow. "This place is jam-packed. Where d'you wanna go?" she asked, shouting out of necessity like everybody else. Eleven surveyed her options. She wasn't very tall, but they were standing at the highest point of the first floor, so she could see the tiered rows of seats descending toward the stage on either side of them. Immediately to their left and right were staircases that led up to the balcony, which offered more seating. Her gaze, though, landed on the flat standing area directly in front of the stage, which was filling quickly.

"Want to be close," Eleven said, pointing to the foot of the stage. "To see Mike."

And so the party made their way down the steps to the lowest point in the room, Max pushing and shoving through the crowd gathered there to find a spot where Eleven could see a reasonable amount of the stage. They finally came to a stop only a few rows back from the stage. Eleven turned to Max and smiled widely. "Thanks," she said.

"Don't mention it, lover girl," she replied, giving her friend a playful

nudge.

Eleven then turned to face the boys, standing right behind them, who she noticed were all wearing varying expressions of apprehension. "Thank you, guys. For being here."

Their faces relaxed a bit and they smiled back at her. She turned to face the stage once more, noticing the instruments hadn't sounded off in a while. She heard Lucas pose the other two boys a question, sounding slightly nervous. "You think it'll be really weird when he notices we're here? We're like, really close. There's no way he won't see us."

"I don't know," said Will. "I'm not really sure how he'll react. But I'm honestly kind of excited to hear him. He must be pretty good if this is the crowd he draws."

At that moment, the curtain opened and a loud cheer went up from the concertgoers. The owner of Hawkins Theater, an older gentleman named Rob Deckard, walked up to the microphone to introduce the band, as was his tradition. It couldn't be said that Rob was ugly, though he was aged. The man looked like Clark Gable, and the running joke in Hawkins had always been that he really was.

"Well, I'll try to make this quick so we can all hear some rock n' roll," he said to the vast approval of the crowd.

"Mike Wheeler is a Hawkins native who picked up a guitar for the first time in 1984. The rest, I suppose you could say, is history. Since then, he's put together a band and played many gigs around Hawkins and neighboring cities. It was in this very theater that Mike and the boys unwittingly played a show for which a talent scout from Chicago was present. The scout was so impressed that he signed the boys immediately, and they are currently in the process of recording their very first full length album of all original music. We are about to witness something special here tonight, ladies and gentleman. Here is the birth of a legendary band, whether they ever achieve the fame they deserve or not. You and I have the honor of hearing an entirely original set, and I guarantee you, these boys do not disappoint. With that in mind, Please give a warm Hawkins welcome to Mike Wheeler and the Dungeon Raiders!"

As the crowd gave their enthusiastic reply, the group all looked at each other, eyes wide. "*The Dungeon Raiders?*" they said in unison. Dustin shook his head. "Is that supposed to be a nod to D&D or something? Thought he wasn't into that kind of stuff anymore."

Max was laughing, trying to pull herself together. "I have no idea," she said. "But they need to get that one fixed *real* quick. The *Dungeon Raiders? Eugh*. That's horrid."

Eleven looked affronted at her friend's assessment of the name. "I think it's kind of cool," she defended.

Max only looked at her like *of course you do*. But then, a guitar was strummed, its tone reverberating throughout the building and cutting through all other noise as easily as a knife through warm butter. The band walked onto the stage and the crowd gave a deafening roar.

And there he was, maybe twenty, thirty feet away from her. Mike. He wore jeans, a white t-shirt, and a black leather jacket. His hair was a frizzy, curly mess framing his face, and he was clean-shaven, for a change. He wore a broad smile as he approached the microphone. "We're here to play some rock n' roll," he said. The crowd approved. And so they launched into an upbeat tune unlike anything Eleven had ever heard before, and she was mesmerized.

Mike had played enough gigs by now that he was getting used to the nerves. But when he saw his old friends, almost on the front row, he about had a heart attack. He had skipped a whole line of lyrics, hoping no one knew their songs well enough to notice. *What are they doing here?* he thought. Needless to say, he had a hard time focusing on the music after that. He tried not to keep glancing down at them, but it was too surreal to see them there. He would've never thought that they'd come to one of these shows. He thought they despised him.

It was a good thing that he'd played these songs enough to have most of them down to muscle memory. Half of his attention was entirely elsewhere, like he was in some sort of weird dream state: aware of himself on the stage but in another mental realm altogether. He noticed that his old gang was with the two girls they always hung

around. Max Mayfield was one of them, he knew — that psychopath Billy Hargrove's step-sister. He hadn't had much experience with Max, but she seemed alright. She had been a bit of a loner when she first moved to Hawkins, so Mike was surprised when he saw her hanging around with his old group. He'd tried not to feel resentful about being replaced, but it had been a little while before he'd gotten over it.

The other girl he knew even less about, which was disappointing. Disappointing...why was it disappointing? He decided it was probably just because of how cute she was, and he was being a total doofus about it. It was just basic, biological, physical attraction. Nothing else to it. He didn't even know her, and there was no reason to feel so crushed that he didn't. Crushed and...jealous. Jealous that he didn't know her and they did.

Mike shook his head, trying to focus as he realized they were approaching a difficult breakdown in the song. He'd been singing this whole time and he didn't even know what he sounded like. He pushed that terrifying thought to the back of his mind. He glanced back at Johnny, the drummer, exaggerating his strumming and stomping his foot so the other boy could synchronize with him.

They came out the other end of the bridge in good shape, and Mike let his eyes drift to the girl a few rows back, moving and nodding her head to the beat, a beautiful smile plastered on her face. Their eyes met and her grin must've been contagious, because Mike's lips turned up so far that his cheeks hurt. Her eyes were so *big* somehow, and they shone with something like innocence and wonder. He'd never seen another girl like her. His heart was pounding, and for once it had nothing to do with being on stage.

Jane, he thought. Though that's all he knew. He remembered the day she'd come up to him at lunch, trying to introduce herself, but the stupid cheerleading squad had cut her off and gotten in his face to invite him to some party or another. He hadn't had the guts to approach her after that, primarily because she was always with Will, Dustin, and Lucas, and he figured it would've been a disaster to try talking to her with them there.

He looked back at his former friends — his party. Looking at them was a reminder of how miserable these past years had been for him.

He felt that familiar stab of cold emptiness, like a knife that had been left in the freezer all night was lodged in his ribcage. He felt the hollow feeling move up from the base of his spine and shoot into his arms, coursing like electricity down into his fingertips. In the past, he remembered Mr. Clark teaching a lesson on the incredible effects that emotions could have on the human body; how a person could be so sad or so angry that they felt real, physical pain. He hadn't believed it back then, even with the scientific evidence to back it. He'd never experienced anything like it.

He would've loved to claim that the split with his best friends hadn't wounded him. That it might have sucked for a while, but he'd gotten over it — adapted. That he was the same as he'd always been. He didn't think he'd ever admit it to anyone, but he knew that all of that would be a lie.

Music had been his only real comfort in the endless whirl of superficial, fake friends. Of drugs and alcohol and late nights out. Of countless drives to the quarry just to sit and think. Of nights spent at home alone trying to lose himself in a show, a movie, or homework — whatever would take his mind of the hellish nothingness that was his life. Whatever his life had turned into after his friends had cut him out of the picture, he didn't like it, and sometimes it was too much to handle all on his own.

With that line of thought came the end of another song, and Mike turned away from the crowd for a moment, calling a quick band huddle at the centrally located drum-set. He changed the setlist so that the last four songs better reflected his mood. And then, he gave himself to the music.

When the curtain closed, Eleven realized how sweaty she was. She would've never thought she'd enjoy something so *loud* and *aggressive*, but Mike had delivered those final songs with such passion that she'd found herself jumping up and down like the rest of the crowd. The noise had been all-encompassing. If she closed her eyes, it was the only thing that existed, and it flowed through every artery, every vein in her body. She'd felt like she was on fire.

There was something about the sound of those last songs he'd played

that she could relate to. She'd had a hard time with the lyrics since it was the first time she'd heard any of his songs and there were words she didn't recognize. And it was already easy to miss words at a concert. But there was something about the way they'd made her *feel* that was perfectly relatable. It had reminded her of all the painful things in her life, all the injustice that had been dealt her — and it made her want to fight back. To do something about it. She felt more energized than she had in a long time.

She had caught some words, though: the last lines of the last song. She couldn't get them out of her head:

And it tortures slow

Never lets you go

Deals a crooked hand

It had taken her a few seconds to decipher what it all meant, the definitions in her head slowly revealing each word's significance in context of the others. But she got it eventually. In fact, she understood all too well what it meant.

"Do you want to keep waiting?" Max yelled over the general commotion, bringing Eleven back to the present. "We can go to the back so we're out of the way." Eleven nodded, and the party began making their way up the tiered steps. They'd agreed to wait around for a bit after the show to see if Mike would come out to talk to people. She didn't want to miss an opportunity, and she figured it'd be easier to talk to him outside of school anyway.

They were nearing the last set of steps, but suddenly Dustin turned around, a panicked look on his face. "Shit! Abort, abort, abort. Get back down there," he said, as he tried to herd the rest of the group ahead of him.

"What the hell are you doing, man?" Lucas asked.

Dustin continued to push the group in the direction they had come from. "The Chief's standing in the back *right* by the doors and I don't know how he hasn't seen us yet."

Max's eyes, which had previously been narrowed in annoyance at Dustin, now shot wide open. "*The Chief?*" she said. "What the hell is he doing here?" She looked to Eleven as they picked up the pace, trying to distance themselves from the bear of a man. "Did he say anything about coming here?" Max asked her. Eleven shook her head, mystified. *What was he doing here?*

She risked a glance towards the back of the place and found him immediately, his height singling him out. He was at the bar, talking to a man she didn't recognize. He wasn't in uniform. She knew he usually took off early on Fridays, unless there was something that demanded his immediate attention. So what was he doing here? Did a fight break out, and he'd been called? Surely one of his officers could have handled that. She decided to worry about that later. She focused on finding a good spot to hide until he left.

They were almost back down to the stage when Eleven spotted Mike standing next to the wall left of the stage, talking to a couple guys she recognized from the school football team.

"Um, guys?" Will said, looking back to the steps. "I think Hopper's coming this way. Like, fast." They all looked back. Hopper waved to someone off to their right, then began trotting down the steps to meet them. He was maybe a hundred and fifty feet away, but moving quickly.

"Shit," Max muttered. Only a hundred feet now.

"What do we do, what do we do?" Dustin muttered frenetically, grabbing his curly hair in frustration.

Fifty feet. Surely he'd see them.

"Rob!" they heard Hopper yell. "What a show, huh?" All he would need to do is glance to his left and he'd see them. Hopefully Rob would buy them at least another minute. The whole party was panicked, facing away from the Chief and failing miserably at looking inconspicuous. Max was looking around as if searching for a solution. Suddenly she spotted Mike. She snapped her fingers, and Eleven could practically see the lightbulb magically suspended above her head. She sped over to Mike, dodging and slipping past straggling

concertgoers. She cut off whoever he was talking to, and began bombarding him in that rapid fire way of hers.

Lucas groaned. "What is she *doing*?" Eleven kept her eyes on Mike. At first, he was clearly surprised. Then he looked confused. But as Max finished, he nodded resolutely and said a few words, motioning to a door to the left of the stage.

Max looked back at the party and motioned frantically for them to follow her. Eleven started to move but the boys seemed rooted to the floor. Max looked exasperated. *Come. On.* she mouthed.

Then they overheard Hopper's conversation with Rob. Both men were speaking so loudly that it wasn't all that difficult. They were laughing at something and Rob said, "Say, Hop, why don't I introduce you to the band? Great group of kids, and I'm sure they'd love to hear you liked the music."

Hopper seemed to deliberate for a moment, but gave in. "Uh, sure, I guess. Lead me to 'em."

"Shit, shit, shit," Dustin whispered shrilly, hurrying toward Max as the two men drew closer. Eleven, Will, and Lucas followed suit. They reached Max and Mike, and the leather-clad boy led them wordlessly to the side of the stage where there was a door. He swung it open and held it for them, motioning for them to get in.

After they were inside, he stepped in and closed the door just as Rob was saying, "Here's Johnny Parker, the drummer. You know Suzy Parker's youngest? I don't know where Mike Wheeler has run off to but..."

Mike really couldn't sort through all of the emotions he was feeling, so he opted not to. He would just go with it. He opened the door and let all of them run up the stairs that led backstage. Then, he followed. He walked up the steps at a much slower pace. Once he reached level ground and rounded the corner, he could hear them all whisper-shouting to each other. There was an odd familiarity to the sound. He remembered having conversations with the boys that had sounded just like that: rapid, sarcastic back and forth in whispers that weren't

really whispers when they didn't want their parents or a teacher to hear what they were saying. Despite himself, Mike smirked at the memory of those times. He could hear just about everything they were saying, which probably meant everyone had always heard what they were saying back then.

Dustin was talking when Mike silently entered the room. It was almost pitch black without the lights on, and they didn't notice him.

"...honestly don't know why he decides to show up the *one* time we decide to break the rules with Eleven. This just goes to show that my instincts are always right about this kind of—"

Dustin shut up immediately when Mike flipped the lights on, and they all jumped, still on edge. A dim, warm glow filled the space, revealing cluttered sound equipment and haphazardly strewn furniture. Mike wanted to ask what "breaking the rules with eleven" meant, but he decided not to be nosy so soon. "So Max tells me you guys are hiding from Chief Hopper," he said instead.

There was an awkward pause. "Uh, yeah," Lucas said, taking the lead. "The Chief is actually Elev—"

Max stomped on his foot, hard. "*Jane!*" he squeaked. "The Chief is Jane's dad. She's not really allowed to go to concerts and stuff, so..."

Mike contemplated for a moment. Lucas had almost called Jane by another name. Not really a name, rather, but a number. Eleven. He was sure of it because of what Dustin had said earlier. And Max was acting like it was some weird secret. He wondered if he should call them out on it. He decided he would, but he didn't want to be rude to Jane, so he addressed her. "Why do they call you Eleven?" he asked, locking eyes with her wide ones, shining like amber in the lighting. *She is so damn pretty*, he thought distractedly.

She looked the very definition of a deer caught in headlights. She glanced nervously at the others, and Mike could see the plea for help in her eyes. "It's okay if you don't want to tell me," he said, not liking how uncomfortable she looked. "I was just curious. It's not every day you meet someone who goes by a number instead of a name." She seemed to relax, if only a little bit, and smiled at him. But everyone

stayed quiet, and he faltered a bit, wondering what he should say. "I'm Mike, by the way," he said, stepping forward to shake her hand. "I don't think we've ever really met, so..."

She smiled and took his hand, gripping it gently. He noticed how small and delicate her hands were. "I'm Jane," she said. "But...I guess you know they call me Eleven. It's just...kind of a secret thing, though," she finished haltingly. Mike found he really liked her voice. She was soft-spoken and tended to draw out her words, almost as if she was sounding them out. It wasn't a bad thing, but there was something strange about it that he couldn't put his finger on.

"How about...El?" he asked. "Short for Eleven?" After he said it, he cringed internally. Trying to give this girl he just met a nickname for her nickname? What was he doing? She just had this effect on him that he couldn't help — she looked so genuine and real, and it made him want to be familiar with her.

She looked a bit taken aback by his suggestion, and he scratched the back of his head, trying to feel less awkward. "Sorry, that's kind of lame," he said.

She shook her head adamantly. "No," she said. "I like it." He had stepped close when he shook her hand, and she had to look up to see his eyes. She glanced up at him now, through long lashes, and gave him a smile. Mike thought he might melt on the spot.

"Oh," he said. "Okay. Cool."

"Cool," she replied.

Dustin cleared his throat, reminding him that there were others in the room. Mike stepped back and looked around, not knowing what to do next. Fortunately he didn't have to figure it out.

"So, um...thanks for saving our asses, Mike," Will said. "And by the way — you *rock*. I've never heard music like that in my life. Without a doubt, this was the best live show I've ever been to."

A part of Mike didn't want his heart to swell like it did at those words. He wanted to stay angry. He wanted to prove to them that he

didn't need them. But he was tired and drained from the concert, and quite frankly, he was starving for encouragement. Besides, it was Will. He couldn't put into words how much he missed Will. It was easy to take such a positive, supportive friend for granted until you suddenly didn't have them to fall back on anymore.

"Thanks, Will. That, um — that means a lot, man. I'm really glad you liked it," he said.

"I can't wait until your album comes out," said Will. "I'm gonna get one for Jonathan; he'll be blown away by this stuff, it's right up his alley. I wish he could've been here tonight, but he's working."

"Oh, you're right!" Mike said, remembering. "This is totally Jonathan's style, I didn't even think about that." He paused for a second, recalling a time several years ago when the original party was still together. "Remember that time we all snuck into Jonathan's room in the middle of the night to listen to that Velvet Underground album we weren't allowed to listen to?" he asked.

"But the headphones weren't plugged into the stereo system all the way, and the start of the first track shook the whole house?" Will finished, chuckling.

Lucas and Dustin laughed as they remembered. "And your mom sprinted through the doorway with a frizzy afro and tripped over Dustin," Lucas added, and all the boys laughed for real now.

Mike saw Max and El look at each other and smile. Suddenly, reminiscing and laughing with these guys didn't feel quite right. The problem was still there, he'd just forgotten about it for a second. "I'm gonna go check if the Chief is gone yet," he said. "I'll be back in a minute."

El couldn't believe she'd finally met Mike. She kept thinking about the new name he'd given her, saying it over and over again in her head, trying to remember exactly what his voice had sounded like when he said it. *El. El. El.*

He had taken something that represented years of pain and isolation

to her, and turned it into something beautiful. He'd taken the mere number they had assigned her — something that marked her as subhuman — and given her something of her own. He'd never know how much that meant to her.

They were still waiting backstage for Mike to come and give them the all clear. It had been a few minutes since he'd left. They didn't know what the hold up was.

Max nudged El, giving her a knowing smirk. "So," she said. "El, huh?"

El blushed, but she couldn't help her toothy smile. "Yes," she sighed. "El."

"I like it," Max admitted. "Don't know why we never thought of that one. Better than a number, for sure, yeah?"

"Yeah," El replied, head still swimming.

Lucas and Will were sitting on an old couch that was pushed up against the back wall, sound equipment and wires surrounding it. Dustin paced the open floor in the middle. None of them had said much since Mike left. Maybe they didn't want to acknowledge that Mike wasn't acting much like the douche they thought he was. He was acting kind of like...Mike. Like they remembered him.

Maybe things didn't have to be the way they'd been for the last few years. Maybe they could be friends again.

It would have been awkward to try describing what the concert sounded and felt like. Writing about music is always tough.

However, I think that the type of musical artist I've imagined the Mike of this universe being is really important. I think the kind of music a person relates to, creates, or enjoys (not only lyrics, but general tone and vibe) says a lot. Sometimes it can say more than words alone can.

That is why I've created the setlist that Mike's band played at the show in this chapter. In this universe, all of these songs are Mike's original songs. But I've picked real, modern songs that I

feel exemplify the style I've imagined for him so that — if you want to — you can go and listen to these songs, imagining what this concert would have been like.

I picked songs that didn't exist in the 1980s for logical reasons. But it's really fun to imagine what the response to these kinds of songs would have been in back then. Many of these songs would have been extremely unique at the time, and would have drawn great attention, which explains Mike's success and popularity in the story.

Anyway, I've tried to pick songs not just because I really like them, but because they fit the image I'm trying to create.

I've made sure none of the lyrics are anachronistic.

If you don't want to listen to all of these, I'd encourage just to listen to "Out Of The Black." The tone and even the lyrics of that song are really fitting.*

Setlist:

Colony House – You Know It

Band of Skulls – Black Magic

Arctic Monkeys – Arabella

Bass Drum of Death – Get Found

Circa Waves – Goodbye

Catfish and the Bottlemen – 7

The Kooks – Bad Habit

Miles Kane – Come Closer

Nothing But Thieves – Hanging

(Mike changes the setlist)

Queens of the Stone Age – Head Like a Haunted House

Queens of the Stone Age – The Evil Has Landed

Royal Blood – How Did We Get So Dark?

Royal Blood – Out Of The Black*

4. Chapter 4

Mike had seen almost immediately that Chief Hopper was no longer around and that the coast was definitely clear. He had even checked the parking lot to make sure that the Chief's truck wasn't there. After doing this, though, he didn't feel up to going back to his old friends so quickly. He hadn't talked to them in years, and all of sudden they show up at one of his gigs along with the prettiest girl in school. And they had been talking like nothing had ever happened — they had been *reminiscing*, thinking back on the days before the bond between them had shattered. It was a bit much to take in so fast.

Mike made his way to the restroom and approached a sink. Placing a hand on either side of the sink's basin, he leaned forward and looked into the mirror, sighing a weighty sigh from deep in his chest. There was still a faint, glossy sheen to his face; the show hadn't ended long ago and he'd worked up a sweat. His usually wild, frizzy hair was only slightly less so, a bit damp and hanging like a frame around his face. He focused on these solid details for a second, making an account of the number of freckles on his face just to busy his mind while he took a few deep breaths.

What is wrong with me? he thought. *Why do I feel like I'm about to pass out? It's like I'm really...*

And his line of thought halted. He felt almost like he had right before he played his first live show at that seedy bar, Cliff's.

He was nervous. He knew that's what it was. He was nervous about talking to his friends, about actually interacting with them. Far too large a part of him wanted to make a good impression so that they would think better of him. But there was a part of him that wanted to remain angry and distant, too. It was what he'd become used to. He didn't know which of his conflicting desires would win out.

He did know one thing for certain, though. He didn't want to be rude to Jane Hopper — or El, he guessed he should call her now — his nickname, he should probably stick to it.

Mike turned the sink on and splashed cold water onto his face,

clearing his head a bit. He yanked a paper towel from the dispenser on the wall and dabbed his face dry, banking the crumpled wad off the wall and into the trashcan on his way out. Leaving the restroom, he saw that there were hardly any people remaining in the venue. He saw his bandmates chatting with some friends from school near the first row of seats and waved off their questioning looks when they saw him. "Just gonna make sure all my gear is packed up and start getting it to the car," he said as he made his way to the door at the side of the stage.

When he made it backstage again, he found the party waiting for him in various states of anxiousness. Dustin paced and mumbled under his breath. Lucas sat in a chair and tapped his foot rhythmically. Will was simply watching Dustin in mild fascination, as if he wondered how long his friend could walk back and forth before his shoes wore through or the floor eroded away beneath him. Max was splayed out on a beat up old couch, El sitting up straight beside her, looking around at everything in the room with wide eyes.

Dustin turned on his heel and began his four-hundred and eighty-seventh lap as Mike made his way forward, stopping him dead in his tracks. Everyone looked up once the constant, measured sound of Dustin's footfalls ceased. They saw Mike, and there was a beat of silence.

"Well?" Max said. "Are we clear?"

"Um, yeah," said Mike. "All clear."

There was a collective sigh of relief from the party as they all stood, ready to get going. Mike felt a strange pang at their eagerness to leave.

Will came up to him and clapped him gently on the shoulder. "Thanks again, man," he said as the group began filing down the stairs. He turned to leave with the rest of them but only took two steps before he stopped and turned around. "Mike, it's been a long, long time. Do you think, um . . . do you think maybe you'd wanna catch up sometime?"

Apparently the others weren't out of earshot yet. Mike heard the

footsteps on the staircase come to a sudden halt. Then he realized Will had asked him a question. Then he understood *what* Will had asked him. And for some reason, there was no hesitation or insincerity in him when he smiled and said, "Sure, Will. I'll see you at school — or, you know, I'll call you or something. Whichever happens first."

Will smiled back and turned to go, almost running into El, who had apparently been standing at the top of the steps watching them the whole time. Will made a face Mike couldn't decipher and slid easily around her, heading down the stairs and ushering the rest of the party out of the door. That left he and El alone at the top of the steps. She was just standing there, looking at him with those impossibly wide eyes, so full of wonder somehow.

"Um . . . it was really nice to meet you, El," he said honestly.

She gave a shy smile and glanced down before meeting his eyes again. "Nice to meet you too, Mike."

"So . . . will I see you again? Like, at school, or? . . ."

Unless Mike was mistaken, her face seemed to brighten at this.

"Yes," she said.

Yes? Mike didn't really know what to make of that. Was she just being polite? Or did she actually want to see him again? Maybe "yes" was enough from her. She did seem fairly shy, after all.

"Okay. Well — awesome. Great. I guess I'll see you, then," he said. "Bye El."

She gave him one of those smiles that were beginning to torture him already. He couldn't get the image of it out of his head even when she wasn't smiling.

"Bye Mike," she said. And she walked down the steps, and out the door.

Dustin and Lucas made their way out of Mr. Rane's physics class a

little downtrodden. They headed for the cafeteria together.

"If that old toad is so set on annihilating our GPA, I don't know why he doesn't just give us an exam and fail us now," Dustin said miserably.

Lucas nodded, not looking any happier. "This is the most insane rubric for any project I've ever seen. And a ten page paper explaining our process on top of everything else? Due in two weeks? Forget it. I don't even know what I want to do mine on. Might as well accept the fact that the best I can hope for on this thing is a low C."

"Your estimation seems pretty accurate to me. Mr. Rane can eat slugs and die for all I —"

"Dustin! Lucas!" Mr. Rane yelled out from behind the boys in the hallway. He sped by at a brisk pace, his floaty halo of white hair standing upon his head as he zoomed around. "Looking forward to you boys' projects," he said as he passed them, his neck whipping around with all the suddenness of a bird's. "You never fail to impress!"

The boys looked at each other morosely. "Now if you'll excuse me," Mr. Rane said to the empty hallway ahead of him, having already put twenty feet between himself and the boys. "It's spaghetti day!"

"How is he still a teacher?" Dustin asked.

"I dunno," said Lucas. "Tenure?"

The boys made it to the cafeteria and looked around for Will. Max and Jane had a different lunch, so it was just the original party at lunchtime. Well, sort of the original party.

After a minute of walking around and failing to spot Will, Dustin grew frustrated. "Son of a bitch. He's always here before us. This is weird. Should we just sit and wait for him? Do you think he's alright?"

"Dude, chill out, he's probably using the bathroom or something. Let's just pick a spot."

"Wait — didn't he say he might try to eat with Mike today?"

"I thought he was joking," Lucas said.

"Yes, because Will is known for his sarcastic humor," Dustin snapped.

"Alright, alright!" Lucas conceded. "So maybe he's gonna eat with Mike. I still don't see Will or Mike in here. So why don't we just sit?"

"Nah, I don't like this," said Dustin. "Let's just look around for him first. Maybe he got caught up helping Mrs. Tomskey clean up after their lab or something. We can start there."

"Always the investigator . . ." Lucas mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Just lead the way, man. I'm starving."

They began making their way to Mrs. Tomskey's class, all the way at the other end of the school. When they drew nearer to the west end of the building where the class was located, they heard distant, reverberating chatter from around the nearest corner. The amphitheater was around that corner, and they knew that Mike and his friends hung out there during lunch sometimes.

Lucas looked at Dustin. "Maybe he's with them?" He'd meant it as a suggestion but it came out like a question.

Dustin shook his head in mock amazement. "Maybe, but that would be weird as hell. Let's check it out, I guess."

They rounded the corner and the conversation became much clearer.

" — with the whole puke in the baseball cap dilemma, I'm not too sure how that'll work out for him," Leo Jenkins finished saying. Everyone laughed. There were about ten of them all lounging around on different levels of little indoor amphitheater.

No one had noticed Dustin and Lucas yet and they approached slowly. Lucas tapped Dustin on the shoulder and pointed to one side of the semicircular structure, where Mike was sitting and laughing at

something else Leo was saying.

There was a lull in the group's conversation, though, and Jacob Striver spoke up to fill the silence, which was never good. If "biggest douche" were a superlative, Jacob would take it home without question. He had a particularly bad reputation among the girls that had dared to get involved with him.

"Anyone been paying any attention to that Jane Hopper?" he asked, looking around the group questioningly.

Dustin and Lucas stopped their slow crawl forward and darted panicked looks at each other. Did Striver know something about Eleven? What had he seen? The boys silently agreed to move back just around the corner so that no one would notice them. They poked their heads around just the barest bit so that they could hear the faint echo of voices bouncing around the open, tiled space.

" — Chief's daughter?" they caught a lighter, feminine voice asking. "She only hangs out with that one group. The science nerds. A/V club or something? Anyway, why do you ask?"

"I'm just saying," Jacob said, "she could come a little closer if she wanted to. I don't know why she only hangs around those guys. She's just got this — this *figure*, you know?"

"You'd better watch it man," some detached male voice said. "That's the *Chief's* daughter you're talking about. I don't think you wanna get caught up in all that."

"Shit, Johnson," Jacob replied. "Have you seen that perfect little ass? And those *lips*! Good Lord, just take me now if I can't have a piece of that."

There was some general laughter. Maybe not as much laughter as there had been for Leo's stories — but still, it was there.

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other now, faces red and eyes narrowed to slits. The worst thing about this was that they knew they couldn't do anything about it unless they wanted a thrashing.

" — swear if I could just get a hold of her and bend her over a —"

Lucas shoved away from the wall they were leaning against. "I've heard enough," he said in a cold, bitter tone Dustin rarely heard him use. He began stalking down the hallway back toward the cafeteria.

Dustin caught up with him and grabbed his shoulder, spinning him around too hard in misplaced anger. "Are we just gonna do *nothing*?" he almost yelled.

"What the hell could we do about that, Dustin! There's more than twice as many of them, and I guarantee you we're worse at fighting than any one of those guys."

"I didn't say we should fight, I just meant that —"

"That what? We could ask nicely for them to stop?" Lucas said. He stopped walking and pushed up some imaginary glasses on his face, then exaggerated his walk to look almost like a waddle. "*Um, yes, hello, sir?*" he said in the most nasally, nerdy voice he could muster. "*It's just that, well, this is embarrassing — you see, um, that's our friend you're talking about, and we'd really like you to stop talking about her like that. Yes. Okay. Thank you. Goodbye.*"

"We do not sound like that," Dustin said.

"To them, we do," Lucas said.

There was a pause, and they began walking down the hallway again.

"Mike was there," Lucas said after a moment.

"And did you hear him say a word about any of it?" Dustin asked.

"Nope."

"I knew we were right about him."

It turned out that Will really had been held up in Mrs. Tomsy's class and skipped lunch altogether. The party had planned to hang out at Will's house after school, though, so they all met up in the underclass parking lot. Max and Will were already there when Dustin and Lucas walked up, clearly agitated.

"What's wrong with you dorks?" she asked. "You look like someone smashed your HAM radio."

"Where's Eleven?" Lucas asked.

"Keep your voice down!" Max chastised. "We're still at school. You could at least call her El. That's less suspicious."

"I am not using *any* name that *asshole* Mike Wheeler made up!" Dustin spat, going completely red.

"Woah," said Will. "What happened to you guys? Why are you so —"

"Bitchy?" Max interjected.

"I was going to say irritated . . ." Will mumbled.

"Just shut up for a second," Dustin said. "Let us tell you what happened."

And so they told Max and Will what they had heard Jacob Striver say about Eleven. And they also told of how Mike was there. And how Mike said nothing. And how Mike was probably laughing along with the rest of them.

Max was redder than Dustin by the end of it, and Will looked sickened.

"Striver," Max said, and let it hang for a minute. It could have meant a lot of different things. "There are things I'd like do to him that shouldn't be said out loud. But it honestly might be worse for him if I just tell Hopper what he said."

"You think that's what's best for Jane?" asked Will. "I think she'd be better off if she doesn't know about any of this. She doesn't even know what Jacob said means — she doesn't need to be wrapped up in all this pointless drama."

"I think she needs to know, at the very least, that Striver was saying gross stuff about her and that Mike was okay with it," Lucas said. "That way she stays away from the creep. Where is Jane anyway? She should be here by now. Don't you guys have last period together,

Max?"

Max, strangely, looked slightly guilty. Her shoulders were hunched and she was looking down in a very un-Max-like way. "Are you guys sure Mike was there?" she asked. "He doesn't seem like the kind of guy that would be okay with — well, with anyone saying that kind of crap."

"Yes!" Dustin yelled in exasperation. "We both saw him, right Lucas?"

Lucas nodded.

"And you saw him laughing at what Jacob was saying? You saw him go along with it?" She asked.

"Well . . ." Lucas said, "we couldn't exactly see them because we didn't want them to know we were there once they started talking about Elev — about Jane."

Max gained a little confidence. "And did you wait to see if Mike would say anything? Or did you just leave once Striver got started?"

"We heard enough, alright?" Dustin said, his eyebrows drawing together. "Any decent person would've—"

"That's what I thought," said Max. "You don't even now how Mike reacted."

Dustin began to resemble a fresh tomato with a loofa on top. "What does it matter to you anyway?! Why are you trying so hard to defend a guy who is clearly the greatest scumbag on the earth?"

"I think that's pretty harsh," Max said. "And also, I wanted to make sure that he wasn't really a part of that conversation because I just encouraged Jane to talk to him."

She paused, waiting for someone to yell at her. "That's where she is now," she said, her head held high. "Talking to Mike."

Dustin and Lucas stared at her, incredulous.

"Shit, Johnson. Have you seen that perfect little ass? And those lips! Good Lord, just take me now if I can't have a piece of that. She has to have — I don't know, I'd say one of the hottest bodies out of any of the girls in the school. Top five, at least. Man, I swear if I could just bend her over a desk and get her —"

"Striver," said Mike. It was strange. He'd almost whispered it, but it was the fact that he'd said it so quiet that drew everyone's attention to him. "You crossed a few lines there," he said. Blood was very close to the surface of his face, as if he were so angry he'd start bleeding through his pores. "Jane Hopper isn't going to be one of your playthings. Don't talk about her like that again."

It was obvious that Striver was caught off his stride. People didn't normally argue with anything he said. He was a big guy.

He looked confused for about a second, but that's about as long as it took him to process what Mike had said and formulate a response. "O-ho-ho," he chuckled fakely. "Ole Toothpick Wheeler has got himself a girlfriend! Alright man, listen, it's no business of mine what you do with the Chief's daughter, just make sure you two are safe and that you use —"

Mike stood abruptly, surprising Striver just enough to shut him up for a moment. It's not like he could actually make the idiot stop talking. He was twice his size at least. Mike was tall, but he wasn't broad at all. He didn't make a habit of getting into real fights. So he walked away.

After Eleven was unable to focus on anything school-related all day, Max told her that she should try to talk to Mike after school. She really did want to, but she was too nervous. She decided there would be another time, and started walking to the parking lot with Max. Max, however, was not having it. She turned Eleven around, put her arm around her shoulder, and walked her all the way to Mike's locker, dropping her off in front of him and leaving.

Mike's face was obscured from her at first, buried in his locker looking for something. Eventually he pulled a textbook and a binder out, stuffing them into his backpack tiredly. He shut his locker and

turned to go, only to stop abruptly.

"Oh," Mike said, his eyebrows shooting up. "Hi, El." He smiled at her, shouldering his backpack.

"Hi," she breathed out.

Mike was waiting for her to say something else. She had come up to him, after all. But it quickly became apparent that she was waiting for him to say something. He just couldn't get a read on this girl. There was something different about her.

"Is there . . . anything I can help you with, or? . . ." he trailed off.

She looked like she was about to speak, but something behind him distracted her.

"Well, look what we have here!"

It was Jacob Striver. He came up behind Mike and put an arm around him, ruffling his hair with his other hand. Mike scowled. "Now remember what I said, Wheeler. Always use protection. *Always*. And don't let the Chief find out! That would not be pretty." He laughed and Mike shook him off, already completely red. He was about to apologize to El, but when he looked over at her, she was stepping in front of Striver, her eyes narrowed and her stance firm. She looked up at the gargantuan boy, seeming laughably small and dainty in comparison. Anyone could see that Striver could throw her ten feet if he wanted to.

"Don't touch Mike," she said. It wasn't a request. There was no ground for negotiation. No room for confusion.

"Woah there slipstick, chill out, okay? I was just messing around, that's all. I—"

"Don't. Touch. Mike," she said again, mouthing each word slowly and sounding them out as if she were speaking to a toddler. Striver just looked confused and annoyed, and raised his hand as if he were about to say something else. El took a sure step forward and slammed the flat of her palm against his midsection.

You'd expect nothing to happen, looking at the massive size difference between them. El's arm looked like a noodle next to his. But Striver was not unaffected by her little shove. In fact, the force of it knocked him back a few steps. He was so unprepared that he stumbled and landed on his butt.

"The hell? . . ." he said, unsure of what had happened. "Felt like—"

A few kids who'd been standing nearby saw what had happened and were laughing. Striver looked around, and instead of retaliating, he just said, "you two are freaks," and left.

El's expression softened and she looked back to Mike.

"Geez, El," he said, rubbing his arm awkwardly. "You've got a lot more strength in those arms than I would've thought. He wouldn't have budged an inch if I'd've done that to him."

El just shrugged and smiled at him. "He deserved it," she said. "Wasn't being very nice."

El hadn't really understood what Striver had been saying to Mike, but she knew what bullying looked like, and she knew Mike looked uncomfortable. Besides, she had seen and heard about Striver before. Odds were he needed a little sense knocked into him.

Mike chuckled. "Can't argue with you there, I guess. But hey . . . you know you didn't have to do that for me. He would've left eventually. I don't want you to get into trouble or anything."

"It's okay, Mike," she said almost automatically. "It was the right thing to do."

He laughed again. "Guess you're just my guardian angel then," he said. Then he blushed, realizing he'd just called her an angel. "Look, I'm really sorry for what he was saying . . . it was totally gross and uncalled for, and — the guy is just a total mouth-breather."

"Mouth-breather?" El said, questioningly.

"Yeah," he said. "You know. Like, a dumb person."

"Oh. Okay. Yes, he's a mouth-breather."

Mike couldn't help but laugh again. "You know, El, you're actually pretty funny in your own way."

El smirked. "I've been told that before."

"Can I walk with you out to the lot?" Mike asked.

"Yes," she said. "Of course."

5. Chapter 5

Somehow, Max managed to convince the boys that she'd find Eleven and get her to the Byers' without their help. Dustin and Lucas were annoyed and somewhat worried that she might be with Mike given what they'd heard, but Will had corralled them into his car and taken them to his house. He'd made it out of the parking lot not a second too soon, too, because Max could see Mike and Eleven strolling up to the lot, both suppressing smiles.

Max walked over to meet the two of them in the middle of the lot. "Jane, there you are!" she said. "We were waiting for you. The guys already left for Will's house."

Eleven looked like she'd forgotten where she was. "Oh," she said, looking a little guilty. "Sorry. Didn't know how long it had been."

"It's fine," Max shrugged, "we were just . . ." she trailed off, remembering Mike was there, glancing at him for the first time.

"Hey Max," he said. "You and Jane headed to Will's?"

"Wheeler," she said, instead of answering his question.

"That is my name," he said, wondering where she was going with this.

"Can I talk to you for a minute? Like, alone." It was phrased like a question, but her tone, unquestionably, said *I'm not asking*.

"Umm, sure" he said, scratching the back of his head.

"Cool. Jane, would you mind waiting over by my car real quick? This shouldn't take too long."

Eleven gave her a questioning look, but Max tried to put on a reassuring smile. Eventually the brunette nodded and headed over to where Max's car was always parked.

Max waited until Eleven was out of earshot, then took a step closer to Mike. "Alright, listen Wheeler, I don't want to worry her, so I don't

have a ton of time to talk to you. I'm going to ask you some things. If I like your answers, I'm also going to tell you some things. I don't have time for jokes, or confusion, or stupidity, or whatever else. If I ask you something, just answer right away, got it?"

Mike was surprised and clearly took too long to respond for Max's liking. "I *said*, got it?" she repeated, with a harder edge to her voice.

"Fine," Mike said immediately this time, deciding just to play along. "Sure."

"Alright," she said, and sighed once. She ran a hand through her hair as if she was considering something, then looked at him sharply, eyes hard. "What did you do when Striver said those things about Jane earlier?"

Mike, again, looked surprised — and for obvious reasons. But to his credit, he answered without hesitation like she'd asked him to. "I told him that he'd crossed more than one line, and that he needed to be quiet. Then I left," he said. "How did you know about that, anyway? I didn't see —"

"Doesn't matter," she said, obviously closing the topic from discussion. "Do you want to be Jane's friend?" she asked, without giving him any time to recover from the first question.

"Yes," he said without thinking.

"Why?"

"Because she's been nice to me, she seems genuine, and funny, and smart, and she's pretty."

"What does it matter to you that she's pretty?"

"Am I not supposed to notice when a girl is pretty?"

Max eyed him but apparently decided not to press. "Alright," she said. "Listen. I need to tell you some things. None of the stuff I tell you ever leaves your head unless Jane or I tell you it's okay. Okay?"

He thought for a moment. "Okay," he said.

"If you're gonna be hanging around her, there are some things you need to know. First: you may have noticed that the way she talks is a little off. That's because English isn't really her first language. Actually — that's not true. It's more complicated than that. But that's the easiest way to explain it to you. She doesn't have a learning disability or some kind of a mental condition. Like you said, she's really smart. It's just that she got a really late start with English."

"Alright. Noted," Mike said. "Does she not like that to be brought up, or? . . ."

"She doesn't care as long as you're not being condescending. She actually likes to be corrected, because she wants to learn to speak well. Just don't be an ass about it."

"Fair enough," said Mike. "I can see why you'd want me to know that beforehand. Anything else?"

"A lot else," she said. "But only a little I can tell you. The second thing you need to know is that . . . she . . . how to say this . . ." she pondered, looking off absently. "She had a really rough childhood — like, her whole childhood until she started living with Hopper. There was nothing good about it. That's obviously had a lasting impact on her, and it's made her — well, I don't know. It's hard to describe. If there are things about her behavior that seem weird to you, it can probably all be traced back to that. But I'll leave it there, I think."

"So . . . that's it?" he asked. "That's what the whole super-secretive, super-serious, CIA, 'tell the truth, or else' thing was about? You scared the hell out of me."

"I take it so seriously because it's a lot more serious than you understand. But you shouldn't ask her too much about it, okay?"

Mike sighed. "Okay," he said. "Deal."

There was a pause, like Max hadn't thought about what to do or say once she got to this point. Mike shuffled his feet. "Ssssoooo, I guess I should get going now," he said.

"I thought maybe you'd wanna hang out with Jane if you're not busy,"

Max said.

"Oh," said Mike, obviously taken off guard. "I guess I'm not too busy. What are you guys doing?"

"Actually, I meant just you two. I'm going to Will's."

"Just — okay, wait . . . why? What is this? Are you trying to set us up or something?" he said, feeling weirded out now.

"No. Not exactly. Look, here's the deal. I told you she has a rough past. Now she's living with her dad, the Chief. *Chief Hopper*. So she's had a rough go of things and she's the Chief's only kid — only *girl*. Do you think Hopper is just gonna let his little girl wander around Hawkins and do normal teenage girl things?"

"Okay . . ." Mike said. "So he's super strict. How does that explain why you're trying to get us to hang out?"

"There are a couple of answers to that. The first is that she wants to be your friend, and you clearly want to be her's, so I'm just trying to move that along before someone tells Hopper you're getting too close to his precious little girl."

Max paused and sighed like she was dreading how Mike would react to what she was going to say next. "The other answer is that Will, Dustin, and Lucas all love Jane like brothers love a sister — and I'm hoping that if they see how well you and her can get along, that they'll finally give up on this stupid boy-grudge."

Mike's eyes got a little harder, and he looked like he might say something. Instead, he just nodded. "At least you're honest," he said, sighing. "That was actually exhausting. I can't believe you had to tell me all of that just because I started talking to El, like — ten minutes ago."

Max laughed. "You don't know the half of it, Wheeler." She motioned for him to follow her to her car, and they fell into step together. "El . . ." she said, almost to herself. "I really do like that. I'm gonna start using it."

"Feel free," Mike said.

El was nervous. She didn't know what Max wanted to talk to Mike about. She'd been waiting by her friend's car for a few minutes. She was considering popping the lock with her powers and sitting in the passenger seat when a boy came up to the car beside her, opening the door and flinging his backpack into the backseat. He looked familiar. He was getting into his car when he turned to look at El, one foot on the floorboard of his old Corolla. "Hey — you were at the show the other night, weren't you?" he asked.

El nodded. "Yes," she said. She recognized him now. He was the drummer for Mike's band.

"You know, we're playing at the Brewers' house party on Friday," he said. "It's a smaller kind of a thing. We play some of our *other* music that we don't usually play at the big shows. Mike writes a lot. Anyway, invite only, but, uh," he paused, grinning, "consider this your invitation." Then he stepped into his car and backed out, speeding out of the lot.

El didn't really know what to make of it, and she was too preoccupied to worry about it anyway. Mike and Max walked over to the car about a minute later.

"Hey," Max said, uncharacteristically cheery. "Sorry about that. Just needed to ask him something."

She strolled over to the driver's door and unlocked it. "So, uh," she began, "I'm heading over to Will's to get some homework done before movie night tonight. Just make sure to have her to the Byers' by like eight, Wheeler." And with that, she climbed into her car, started it up, and began to back out.

"Wait," El said, seemingly to Max, though it was clear she couldn't hear her from the inside of her car that was getting further away. "What? Why —"

"All very good questions," Mike said as Max wheeled out of the parking lot. "The answer is that I think your friend has gone completely crazy."

"She's always been like that," El replied seriously. Mike snorted and she smiled.

"If I didn't know any better," he said, "I'd say she's trying to pawn you off on me for the afternoon. But I don't mind. I could use the company."

She looked at him. "So . . . what are we going to do?"

"Whatever you want to do, I guess," he said. "We've got time."

"Whatever I want?" she said, looking genuinely shocked.

Mike really couldn't help but smile at her. Something about her expressions was very real. He liked it. "Yeah," he said. "Anything come to mind?"

It occurred to her that Mike was saying he could take her anywhere, right now. No need for Hopper's approval or supervision. No need for the entire party to make a contingency plan just so she could go out to eat. No need for them to crowd around her. As much as she loved them, she felt like she needed some space every once in a while. The care was nice, but it could be smothering. It was like being a puppy that never grew up — constant attention from so many people, and never allowed to be alone.

El didn't really know where she wanted to go. She just knew it would be nice to get away for a bit — with Mike.

"Bowling?" she said, after nothing else came to mind. She'd gone bowling with Hopper before and it had been fun. Sometimes watching Hopper was more fun than the activity itself, though. It was always kind of comical to watch such a big, serious man do things like bowl for fun. She recalled the time he'd found his favorite Jim Croce record and danced as they cleaned out the cabin they'd lived in for a while. She smiled. He wasn't that great of a dancer.

"Bowling it is, then," Mike said, shaking her from her brief reverie.

They climbed into Mike's Cavalier and made their way to the bowling alley. Mike put the radio on a low volume to fill the silence.

Now that Mike and El were alone together, he really didn't know what to say to her. As he drove, he wondered what he'd gotten himself into. No, he wondered what Max Mayfield had gotten him into. How was he even supposed to talk to a girl? What did they like to talk about? He'd had a couple "girlfriends," but he hadn't considered them real relationships. He'd never really connected with them.

"So, um," he began without knowing where he was going. "What's your favorite movie?"

"Movie-s," she said, without hesitation. "Star Wars."

Mike laughed. Okay. So maybe this would be easier than he'd thought. "No way!" he said. "Me too! No wonder you get along with the guys. Who's your favorite character?"

El's lips quirked like she'd never considered it before. "Princess Leia," she said.

Mike gave a slightly disapproving frown. "Alright, I won't fault you for picking the girl, because you are one," Mike said. "But Luke? Or Ben Kenobi? C'mon. Jedi can move things with their minds. How cool would that be?"

"I like Princess Leia," she said. "She's strong even without powers."

Mike nodded in concession. "You have a point."

There was a more comfortable silence in the car now. Queen came on the radio and Mike's fingers drummed to the beat on their own.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Your band's name. The—" she paused like she didn't know if she'd say it right. "The Dungeon Raiders?" she asked. "What is that?"

"Oh," Mike said, flush creeping down his neck. "Yeah it's . . . I dunno. I thought it was pretty cool when I started the band. People have told me to change it, and I get it, people might think it's lame, but—"

"It's not lame," she said, stopping him. "I just meant — why that name?"

"Oh. Well . . . It's kind of a reference to D&D. Or, uh, you know, Dungeons and—"

"Dragons," El finished. "I know what it is. It's not lame," she added when Mike still looked a little embarrassed.

Mike glanced over at El. She was looking ahead, straight out the windshield. Her thick, chestnut hair was loose today, falling in gentle waves to her shoulders. Mike couldn't help that his eyes traced the lines of her hair down to the bottom of her jaw, coming to land decisively on her lips. They were so full, so soft looking. The more he looked at the girl in his passenger seat, the more sure he became that — at least physically — he found her absolutely perfect. And that was a little scary. He'd never been so attracted to someone he barely knew.

He'd been asked what his *type* was before. And until now, he'd always found it difficult to answer. He didn't really know what his type was, or if he even had one. But now that he'd had the opportunity to see her close up on multiple occasions and actually talk to her, Mike was beginning to discover something: his type was El Hopper.

El Hopper was a contradiction. Her face was the perfect face for pouting. Mike doubted Chief Hopper had ever been able to deny her anything if she had a mind to use those big doe eyes, lips pushed out just slightly in a heartbreaking frown. You'd have to be heartless to say no to her.

Her pout could break a heart, no doubt. But her confused face — head tilted like a puppy's, eyebrows scrunched together just so, curiosity plain in her eyes — was undisputedly the most adorable thing any one person could behold.

Adorable, cute, heartbreaking — and yet, while managing to be all of these things at once, Mike can do nothing to contain the hormonal, teenaged part of himself that screams *hot* when he looks at her. So hot she shouldn't be allowed to wear anything but a trash bag or no one around her will ever be able to focus.

El's slight stature and delicate frame speak nothing but femininity. The gentle, soft curves of her body are alluring in the best way. Her naturally tan, silk-smooth skin simply begs for Mike to run his hands all over it — he can almost feel the warmth. And though Mike does his utmost to be a gentleman, it's not like he can just *not* notice the shape of El's rear if she's wearing jeans or shorts, how the curves lead his eyes right down to her flawless thighs.

Yes, El's adorable. She's also downright sinful, and should be made illegal immediately for the sake of Mike's sanity. He's not sure if he's ever met a girl his age that the word "sexy" applies to until now.

He flushes, guilty that he'd let this sexually tinged tangent of a thought run rampant in his head, especially while she was right next to him. Sure, it was natural. But he'd like to think he had more control of his thoughts than that.

Turns out, when El's involved, he really doesn't.

Mike shook his head lightly, trying to get a hold of himself. What had they been talking about?

Oh. Right. His band's name. And El apparently knew what D&D was and didn't think it was lame. He supposed that made sense since she seemed to only hang out with his old party. Still, though. Mike gave her another appraising look as his car sped onward.

Hearing that El knew what D&D was and didn't think it was dumb made Mike feel a lot better about his band's name. His bandmates had been trying to get him to change it for a while, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"So you don't think I should change the name, then?" he asked, breaking the silence that had resettled as a result of Mike's unplanned, near daydream.

"It's . . . good," El said. "But long." She looked at him, smiling apologetically.

Mike laughed. "Yeah I guess it's kind of a mouthful, huh?" he said, thinking on what Max had told him about El's speech difficulties.

"Maybe you could help me come up with a simpler name sometime."

"Okay," El said eagerly, to Mike's surprise.

They pulled into the bowling alley parking lot and got out of the car. El closed the passenger door and stretched, closing her eyes for a moment. Sitting in classes all day had made her stiff. She straightened up, ready to walk into the bowling alley with Mike, but she stopped as soon as her eyes opened.

It had been sunny on the drive over, right?

Yes, she was sure of it. Blue skies in every direction. She remembered feeling the warm glow on her face as she was waiting for Max to finish talking to Mike. She remembered a hawk gliding through the open blue and landing on a branch she could see out of Mike's car window.

So why was it suddenly so cloudy? Cloudy wasn't the right word, really. It was like there was a dark film laid upon the skies — like a dirty silk blanket. Everything was dark and . . .

It was over. She must have blinked, and as fast as it had become dark, all was alight again. The pavement was drinking the sun's rays, and the bowling alley's polished metal sign reflected the steady beam of light.

"El?" Mike said. "You okay?"

El remembered Will describing what it was like to be suddenly thrust into the Upside Down. She, too, knew what that evil place looked like, but she'd never seen involuntary flashes of it like that before.

What she had seen didn't exactly fit Will's description, and it didn't look like the Upside Down that she knew. Still, it had been oddly familiar somehow.

"El?" Mike said, walking over to her now. She focused on reality again and found Mike in front of her. She looked at him and he placed a hand gently on her arm. "You looked pretty out of it there for a minute," he said. "Did something happen?"

"I'm okay," she reassured him. "Just dizzy for a second."

Mike looked at her for a moment more, eyebrows scrunched together. "Alright," he said, letting his hand fall to his side. "Let's go bowl, then."

She smiled at him and they walked into the bowling alley together. They rented some shoes and got set up on a lane. "You know," Mike said, "bowling is actually one of the few physical things I'm pretty good at. I don't wanna be unfair — we can have them put the bumpers on the lanes if you want them."

El arched her eyebrows at him, the barest hint of a smirk playing on her lips. "You think I need help? You're being — pre-sump-tu-ous," she said, using one of the big words she'd learned from Max. She was proud of that one, and she was also enjoying Mike's totally caught off guard expression.

"I mean — I was just trying to say . . ." Mike fumbled, clearly not knowing if he'd offended her or not.

"I was joking," she said. "But really. I don't need the bumpers."

In truth, if she were to rely only on her ability to bowl, she might need the bumpers. But how could she resist using her powers just a little to beat Mike in a game of bowling? Or maybe like, three games.

And so they bowled, and they talked about small things. They talked about school and about Star Wars and D&D. They talked about their favorite restaurants in town, and their favorite colors. Their favorite seasons, their favorite times of day. There were stretches of silence too, but they were easy in a comfortable sort of way.

After Mike finally managed to win a game, which he probably suspected El threw on purpose (because she did), they returned their shoes and made their way out of the alley and back to the car. The sun was just dipping under the horizon, and the last of its light was obscured from Mike and El by the line of trees opposite the bowling alley parking lot.

As they approached Mike's car, El felt a strange sensation on the side

of her neck, like someone had poured ice water on her, though she could feel that she wasn't wet. She looked to her left where there were some trees edging the lot. There didn't seem to be anything there but shadows until she began to turn back to the car. Then she saw it.

It was like a man in all white, spindly and slim. Her eyes darted to focus on the figure but didn't seem to make it that far before she wasn't in the parking lot of the bowling alley anymore.

El looked around. Everything was dark, and cold. There was a wind. It wasn't whipping, but it could not be described as gentle. It moved as if it were alive, as if it had malicious intent. It wrapped its cold, menacing tendrils around her and sapped the warmth from her blood, squeezed the breath from her lungs. When she inhaled it burned like acid.

El turned and saw the bowling alley — it was the bowling alley she'd just been in, but it also was not. It looked as if it had been abandoned two decades ago, overrun by the foulest kind of creatures. It was oozing a slimy substance from cracks in the walls.

El began looking frantically in every direction for Mike. She turned again and took a step toward his car, which now looked as if it hadn't been touched by a human in years. Her foot nudged up against something that felt unpleasantly — alive. She looked down slowly, and screamed.

It was Barbara. She looked exactly as she did when El had found her using the bath the first time. There was some sort of tentacle snaking from her mouth. Her eyes were glass, and her face was a sheen of slime, her skin sallow and transparent, the impression of veins showing through.

El started backward, tripping over herself and falling to the ground. It was there that she saw something she had never seen before, and hoped never to see again. Dustin was there, wrapped in the same kind of alien-like tentacles, one stuck to his mouth like a vacuum sucking the life out of him. His eyes were opened and completely red, his usually fluffed hair pasted to his skull with layers of slime.

El lost control of her breathing. She began to scramble backwards on all fours as fast as she could. "No," she mumbled. "No, no, no." In her panic, she crawled into something that made her shoot up to her feet. She backed away, shaking.

It was Lucas. He was gone, too.

"No no no no," she barely managed breathe out. She took a gulp of air. "MIKE!" she screamed. "MIKE!"

She turned in a circle desperately. "Mike?" she sobbed, without any real hope of finding him.

It was when she she turned completely around again that she spotted Hopper, leaned up against what was supposed to be Mike's car.

Gone.

Gone gone gone.

El's vision went black.

6. Chapter 6

"El, please. Please wake up. El?"

El woke to a blurred haze of colors. She rubbed at her eyes, trying to clear her vision and sat up moaning, totally sapped and exhausted.

"El!" Mike yelled. "You're awake! Are you okay? What happened? Should I take you to the hospital? What—"

He probably would have gone on bombarding her, but he was cut off when suddenly the earth seemed to tilt for a second. Why was the earth tilting? "Shit, son of a . . ." Mike said to himself. El's vision cleared enough for her to make out her surroundings, and she tried to lift herself up from her reclined position so she could see what was going on.

They were in Mike's car. She was leaned back in the passenger seat. Mike must have forgotten what he was doing when she woke up and started to drift off the road. He slowed down, pulled over, and put the car in park. He took a shaky breath and looked at El, who found the lever on the side of her seat and slowly let herself into a sitting position.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "What happened?"

She looked down, not really knowing what to say. She wasn't sure how to even begin explaining to him what had happened. She wouldn't even know how to start if she had to explain it to the party, and they knew way more than Mike.

"El?" he asked. He reached over and just barely let his hand rest on her knee. He looked genuinely worried. She needed to say something, but her brain felt like pudding. She could almost feel coherent thoughts trying form, but they were having trouble crawling through whatever thick, viscous jelly had filled her head. She settled for answering his first question, which she somehow remembered.

"M'okay," she said, low and sort of slurred. *Damn*, she thought. If she couldn't start talking normally, he was going to take her to the

hospital. And that was definitely not what she needed right now. She ran a hand down her face and took a deep breath, trying to sit straighter.

"I'm okay," she managed to say reasonably clearly, looking at him.

Mike looked at her for what felt like a long time. He seemed skeptical, but he brought his hand back to the wheel after a moment. "Alright," he said after some deliberation. "I think — I think I should get you home, then. You look like you need rest."

"No!" she said, more awake now.

She couldn't go home. The sun was well and truly down now, and she didn't know when Hopper would be back. If he saw her like this, he'd freak out. She would be on total lockdown for a week at the very least while he tried to figure out what was going on.

"No?" Mike said, clearly confused. "El, c'mon. You can't seriously be thinking about going to Will's. You just — you just — well, you didn't black out exactly, it was like you — I'm not sure what to call it. Do you even remember what happened?"

El remembered in excruciating detail what had happened. If she closed her eyes she could still see the ruined faces of her friends, all mutilated, barely human . . . and Hopper. He had been there too.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Don't remember."

Mike was silent for a minute. He sat back in his seat fidgeting with his hands, his eyebrows bunched together. Shadows from the trees lining either side of the road fell over the car and wrapped around it like dark rope. Mike was impossibly pale where the moonlight shown through the windshield onto his skin. It made his presence seem strangely surreal.

"You were screaming," he said. It was almost a whisper, implausibly soft. "It's weird that no one else came running over, actually. The parking lot was nearly empty, but I wouldn't have been surprised if they had heard you in the bowling alley . . ."

El didn't respond. She stared unwaveringly into her lap, so he decided

to press on. "You started saying 'no,' over and over again. And then you were looking around everywhere and screaming my name like you couldn't see me, even though I was right in front of you. I really —"

He paused. "I was pretty freaked out. I mean — I was scared. I didn't know what was happening to you. I thought maybe . . . I don't know. I thought maybe you were having some sort of a seizure or stroke or . . . I don't know. Something."

She glanced over at him, looking him in the eye. "I'm sorry," she said. "Didn't mean to scare you, I just — don't know what happened," she said. She felt bad lying to him, but she didn't know how to explain it.

Mike sighed. "It's okay," he said. "It's not your fault. I just don't think it's a good idea for you to go to the Byers' right now. That seemed pretty serious and I just . . . I feel like I should just get you home." He moved his hand to turn the key that was still resting in the ignition. Suddenly, El's hand was covering his.

"Mike," she said seriously. Her eyes were petrified amber cast in the silver light. "Please. Somewhere else."

She knew she'd be breaking the rules if she wasn't at the Byers' tonight. She knew she'd be breaking more rules for going somewhere alone with a boy, especially at night. And even though she wasn't the queen of social graces, she knew that she was putting pressure on Mike and possibly making things a little bit weird for him. But she trusted him. For whatever reason, in her gut, she did. And she knew she couldn't see Hopper or her friends right now. She was scared, exhausted, and confused, and she wasn't the best actor in the world. They'd know something was up, and she didn't want them to blow things out of proportion before she even knew what was going on. It was probably just what Hopper had talked to her about before: post traumatic stress.

"El . . ." he groaned. "Why somewhere else? Where is somewhere else, anyway? We don't even know what just happened to you, it could be super serious. I don't even have anywhere to take you." He stopped, waiting for her to offer an explanation. She didn't. "Why don't you want to go home? Can you at least tell me that?"

"Please," she said weakly. "Not Will's. Not home. Just for tonight. I'll try to explain. Just not now — too tired."

Mike could see that she was, indeed, fighting to keep her eyes open and losing rather quickly. She looked pale. The moonlight sliding along her skin gave her a porcelain appearance, but it wasn't a good one. She looked brittle, as if she might break or crack at any moment. Mike could see the veins crisscrossing just beneath the surface of the skin on her face, and he knew it wasn't a good sign. "Please, Mike," she whispered again, eyes closing. "I know we just met. But please. Trust me."

El awoke again, a little gentler this time. The cold was what had brought her out of sleep. It seeped through her clothes and settled against her, biting. It wasn't exactly a nice way to wake up. But there was a pleasant warmth blooming from her right arm. She moaned and tried to scoot closer to the source of the warmth, leaning into it.

"El," a voice said quietly. A warm sensation like the one on her arm bloomed upon her forehead and she made a discontented noise, feeling like she was being teased. She was still cold everywhere else. She wrapped her arms around herself as tight as she could.

"El," the voice said, a little firmer. "We're uh — we're here. Somewhere else, I guess . . ."

The voice trailed off and El heard it mutter "this is crazy" like no one was supposed to hear it. Something began jostling her lightly, and she just couldn't hope to fall back asleep anymore. With great effort, she wrenched her eyelids open.

She was in a car. She looked around slowly. The door was open. Mike was there, his hand on her arm. "You awake?" he said, obviously concerned and barely holding onto his composure.

"M'awake," El yawned. "M'fine." She tried to sit up, but didn't quite make it the whole way before she crumpled back into the seat. It had found its way into the reclined position again somehow. Mike pulled the lever and sat her up straight, then took one of her hands in his. He helped her out of the car as if she were an elderly woman on the

brink of death.

Once he had her out, he kicked the car door closed and draped one of her arms over his shoulders, placing an arm beneath her's and across her back. At a glacial pace, they began inching towards his house. He had snuck in and out of his room many times, but he didn't know how he'd get a nearly unconscious sixteen-year-old girl up there.

Eventually, they approached the house, right beneath his room's window. Usually he pulled himself up onto the roof of the one story portion of the house by standing on a sill, and then just walking carefully to the window of his room that overlooked the side of the house, not the one that overlooked the front yard. There wasn't really a good way to get to that one. Now, though, he had no idea what to do. He'd thought that he would just figure it out when he got here, but now that he was faced with the challenge of somehow hoisting El up to his room, he was at a loss.

El, brought slightly back to her senses by the chill, noticed Mike's problem. "Room?" she asked, pointing to the window on the side of the house.

Mike glanced at her, surprised she'd spoken. "Yeah," he said. "My room. I have no idea how to get you up there."

"Go first," she said. "Pull me up after."

Mike looked at her incredulously. "I'm not strong enough to lift you up there all on my own!" he whispered. "You're not in any state to help me out, either," he added, significant worry in his voice. El was shivering, but only slightly at this point.

She shook her head. "Trust me," she said. "I'm light. You can do it."

Mike stared at her some more. He seemed to accept his fate, because he propped El up against the house as easily as he could and climbed onto the shorter portion of the roof — left foot on sill, push off, grab lip of roof, pull up.

When he was up, he turned around crouched, looking down at El. "Okay," he said, sounding entirely unsure. "Can you grab my hands?"

He laid down on the roof and reached his arms all the way down so she could grab hold of him. Tiredly, she pushed off the wall she was leaning on, turned, and grabbed Mike's hands. Then she reached into her deepest reserve of energy and somehow mustered the strength to levitate herself just slightly — not enough for Mike to think she was actually floating upward, but enough to make her significantly lighter than normal. She knew she might blackout from sheer exhaustion, but it would be okay once she was inside. She knew Mike would watch over her.

As Mike lifted her up onto the roof, slowly coming to a crouched position and dragging her up with him, he looked like he couldn't believe what he was doing. El might have laughed at his adorably confused expression if she weren't in such a tired haze.

Eventually he managed to pull her all the way onto the roof. She was too tired to move, though, and ended up sprawled over his lap as he fell on his rear. Her head lolled to the side as Mike tried to gather her up to a sitting position — she just couldn't keep it up anymore. He got her somewhat upright, but she fell back to rest against his chest. It would have been a really nice moment for her, but she couldn't enjoy it for a number of reasons. She patted Mike's head jokingly. "Told you you could do it," she breathed.

She let her head rest against Mike's shoulder for a second while they both caught their breath. She was tempted by sleep, but it was just too cold. She opened her eyes. Where her gaze fell, she glimpsed something in the trees. Something tall, spindly, and white. She felt like someone had doused her in electricity.

Her heart stuttered, dropping through the floor of her chest. "Mike," she said, as frantically as she could, tugging on the sleeve of his sweater. "Inside. Now."

"That's the plan," Mike sighed. "You're starting to shiver pretty bad. We're gonna have to—"

"Now!" was all El could manage.

Mike glimpsed her eyes and seemed to notice how panicked she was. "Okay, Okay," he said, standing her up with a grunt. "It's going to be

alright, we'll get you inside."

El was nearly hyperventilating. She didn't know if the monster in the trees was another demogorgon or something else — but she was pretty sure it was what had triggered her little episode in the bowling alley parking lot. She had to be imagining it, though. Maybe she was having flashbacks to the demogorgon.

Mike helped her get to the window of his room — well, really, Mike sort of carried her there, which didn't seem so easy for him. He wasn't the strongest person in the world, and El wasn't been using her powers this time. She had nothing left in her.

Mike slid open the window, thankful that he'd left it unlocked. He hadn't used it in a little while. "Okay," he said. "Let's get you in." He helped her lift one leg over the sill and into his room, then the other. "Careful," he said, as she tripped over nothing once her feet hit the floor. She came to her knees on soft carpet, a pleasant scent like freshly done laundry wafting to her nose.

Mike came in after her, shutting the window behind him. He kicked off his shoes and crouched down beside the broken looking girl on his floor. "El?" he asked tentatively, placing one arm around her.

El looked up at him, deep bags under her eyes. She looked as if she hadn't rested in days. "Sleep," she said.

"Yeah," Mike agreed. "Sleep."

He helped her tug her shoes off, then got an arm under her and stood her up. "You can have my bed," he said, taking her to it. "I'll sleep on the floor. Let's just make sure you're warm, though . . ." he muttered as he pulled the covers back and laid her down, tucking her in as snugly as he could. She was still trembling.

El's eyes closed as soon as her head was against the pillow, but sleep didn't come as she'd expected it to. Images flashed as if playing on the backs of her eyelids. There was Dustin again, covered in that sickening residue she didn't want to know more about. With effort, she peeled her eyes back open. Mike was still there, holding a hand to her forehead, concerned as ever. Taking comfort in his presence,

she closed her eyes and tried to sleep again.

This time, she saw Hopper. But she also saw that he wasn't dead yet. His body was writhing as a tentacle worked its way out of his mouth. He made muffled gagging noises. Under his shirt, something seemed as if it were about to burst from his stomach, struggling within him, consuming him from the inside out. The white's of his eyes went red and veins pulsed on his forehead. El saw all of this within the space half a second and yelped, sitting upright.

Her head slammed into Mike's, hard. "Ow," he said, sounding more nasally than usual. El rubbed her forehead weakly. Looking to Mike, she saw him holding a hand to his nose.

"I'm so sorry, Mike," she said, wondering how she was even able to talk at this point. "Didn't mean to. Just . . . nightmares."

"And you're still shivering," he said. "Honestly, I still really, really want to take you home or to the hospital, but—"

"Mike," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Your nose is bleeding." She looked as embarrassed as her exhaustion would allow.

Mike pulled his hand away from his nose and saw that it was true. "Don't worry about it," he sighed. "I'll just go clean it up real quick. I'll be right back."

Mike grabbed a tissue and wiped the last of the blood away from his nose. He rinsed his face and took the opportunity to change into the comfier clothes he'd grabbed on the way out of his room.

He leaned against the counter and looked at himself in the mirror. "This is crazy," he said. "This is insane. This is *insane*. She needs a hospital, I just know it."

He ran a hand down his face. "Please, God, don't let anything happen to her. Let her be okay."

He didn't know how long he'd been away from her. He knew he should get back to check on her. He flicked the light off and walked quietly back to his room. Carefully, he slid his fingers behind the little crack he'd left in his doorway and pulled the door gently open. Padding into his room, he noticed the window was still open. A wave of cold nipped at him through his t-shirt. He shut the window as softly as he could and went to kneel next to his bed.

El's thin shape was buried so far under the covers that he wouldn't have known she was still there if not for the fact that she was still shivering. He laid a sympathetic hand on what he hoped was her shoulder.

"Mike?" he heard in the faintest, saddest whisper. His heart ached to hear her voice sound like that.

"Yeah?" he said.

"I . . . I can't sleep."

"Aren't you exhausted?" he asked, confused. Then he remembered. "Oh. Is it the nightmares?"

"Yeah."

"Um . . . is there anything I can to do to help?"

"I don't know," she croaked. "I'm sorry, I . . ."

She sounded delirious at this point and Mike honestly doubted she'd even remember this conversation in the morning.

"Could you . . . sing me a song?" she said after a long pause.

"Sing you a song?" That might actually be doable if he stayed quiet enough. "What song?" he asked.

"One of yours," she yawned.

"One of mine, huh?"

He thought for a minute. Then it came to him. He glanced at his

acoustic guitar and grabbed it after a moment of contemplation. He could pluck quiet enough, he was sure.

And so he played, and so he sang, soft as a summer breeze, his words filling up the air with all the calm, crawling energy of an impending monsoon.

When he finished, El didn't say anything. He could see she was still shivering, though. "El?" he said, checking to see if she'd fallen asleep.

"Mm?" was her vague response.

"I think I should take you somewhere to get you warm."

"No," was all she managed.

Mike sighed, staring at the shaking lump under the covers. Slowly, she pulled them down so that he could see her face and arms. She looked at him, eyes half-lidded, and patted the empty space on the bed next to her. "Please?" she asked, and looked at him with the same eyes she did when she met him backstage.

He knew he should say no. Practically, he didn't even know her. It's not like they'd be doing anything if he laid down next her, but sleeping in the same bed felt weirdly intimate.

Yet here she was, staring up at him with those huge, impossibly innocent eyes. He didn't have the will to say no to her. Besides, she was still trembling.

And so before any rational thoughts could catch up with his body, he found himself climbing into his bed, grabbing even more blankets from a drawer in his nightstand, and draping them over the both of them. She lifted the covers to let him in and immediately curled up next to him as he laid on his back. She rested her head on his chest like they'd known each other forever, and he wrapped an arm around her like it was natural. He told himself it was just to get her warm.

She let out the first contented sounding sigh she had all night and her breathing became deep, and steady.

The second to last thing Mike noticed that night was how good El's

hair smelled. He was weirdly amazed by it because she couldn't have taken a shower since that morning. It smelled incredible, though — something like watermelon or strawberry.

The last thing that Mike noticed before he fell asleep was that El had stopped shivering.

Mike's Song:

Hippo Campus — Monsoon

7. Chapter 7

***Time stamps and some other small details are important in this chapter.**

Thanks for reading, and thanks so much for the reviews! Keep them coming. They keep this story moving along.

Tuesday, November 19th, 1987

8:57 AM:

Mike woke up slowly, stretching his arms out behind his head and groaning a greeting to the sun rays sifting softly through his window. He glanced over to his night stand. *How did I forget to set my alarm?* he thought. *Guess I'll just miss first period today.*

He sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed, about to get up and start getting ready for the day. Rubbing at his eyes, he stopped abruptly, remembering the dream he must have had last night. He stayed there, unmoving, as if someone had found his off switch, trying to remember every detail of the dream.

The image of El slid into his mind, the memory of the warmth in her eyes a stark contrast to the bitter chill of the nighttime landscape his mind had crafted for his dream. El looking up at him and smiling that infuriatingly adorable, shy, soft-lipped smile. El bathed in moonlight. El screaming his name, looking frantically around for anything, anybody to latch onto, somehow blind to him trying to calm her down. El passed out in his car, looking for all the world like the life was being sapped slowly from her veins, her skin pale porcelain ready to crack.

What a random dream, he thought, feeling thoroughly weirded out and confused as to why his brain would even make up such a thing. He moved to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, rubbing the rest of the sleep from his eyes. The morning fog began its languorous crawl out of Mike's head, clearing his thoughts slightly. He'd never been a morning person.

He grabbed a hand towel to dab his face dry, and another slew of dream snippets popped into his brain like they'd been waiting until he was fully awake: he and El talking after school. Max giving him an interrogation. He and El going bowling.

"Holy shit," he said out loud to the bathroom mirror. "It was real."

And then the puzzle pieces slid together, interlocking perfectly to reveal to him the entirety of his previous night. And more memories hit him.

El shivering under the covers of his bed. Shivering as he played her a song, so worried about her that he couldn't even hear himself. El's impossibly soft, lithe frame pressed up against his side in his bed. He remembered being fascinated by how much warmth she was giving off despite how cold she was herself. He remembered wondering at how good she smelled, how incredible her hair felt against his skin. He remembered trying not to think about how attractive she was, or how everything about her felt so *good*, so *right*.

He remembered feeling guilty that he was enjoying holding her so much, because honestly, he didn't even know this girl, and he was absolutely sure that the right thing to do was to take her home or to the hospital even though she had asked him not to.

In the moment, he just hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. She'd pleaded with him multiple times, and for some weird, inexplicable reason, he trusted her completely. Even though everything he knew and everything he'd been taught told him to act a certain way, he had done as she asked him to. He couldn't piece together why that was.

"Wait," he mumbled to himself.

And then he was sprinting back through the hallway to his bedroom, trying not to wack any corners or walls with his lanky limbs. He skidded to a halt at his door and slowly pushed it further open from its cracked position. Leaning in cautiously, he trained his eyes on his bed.

She wasn't there. Right? *She's so small, maybe she's just under the*

covers. He went to his bed and patted it down gently, checking all of the accumulated, thick folds in the comforter he'd made while sleeping — or that he and El had made *together*. For some reason, that thought made Mike's face feel hot. What was wrong with him?

Definitely no El under the covers, though, he confirmed disappointedly as he straightened his bed up. How had she left without him noticing? How had she found the energy to leave at all? He began to worry about her. It had been a cold night. She'd looked like she was fighting for her life. There was no way she'd made it home alright, unless she lived like, in Mike's neighborhood — which for some reason he felt like he'd know, even though he didn't know why.

Mike checked the window that he'd brought her in through, worrying that if she'd used it to get out she may have hurt herself getting back down to the ground.

The window was closed and locked. No way she could've done that from outside. Had she gone out through the front door? Mike's mom was an extremely light sleeper. He didn't see how she wouldn't have heard someone coming down the steps *and* the front door opening and closing, even if El was really quiet.

He scratched the back of his head, stumped. Eventually he decided that he needed to make sure she was okay, no matter how she had managed to get out of his house without anyone noticing.

He walked briskly downstairs and found the phone book in one of the kitchen cabinets. He flipped to the section full of 'H' names, all the while growing a little nervous about calling the Chief of Police's house. He hoped El would pick up, not the Chief.

"Jim Hopper," Mike muttered to himself as he found El's dad and slid a finger under the number to keep his place. He dialed each number into the rotary and the dial tone hummed resonantly in his ear. Absently, just to distract his mind from what he was actually doing, he used his free hand to close the phone book and put it back in the cabinet.

He tapped his foot impatiently until he heard a gruff, baritone voice

buzz to life through the static on the line. "Hi, you've reached the house of Jim Hopper. Feel free to leave a message. Unless you're calling to reach the Chief of Police. Then, please call the station and never use this number again."

Mike heard the tone telling him to begin his message, but decided just to hang up. He didn't want the chief to find a message for El left by a boy he didn't know.

Why didn't she pick up? Had she been crazy enough to go to school even after last night? Had she gone to Will's? For a moment, Mike considered calling the Byers'.

No. He didn't want to freak anybody out. He shook his head and ran upstairs to get ready for school. He'd look for her there, and if he couldn't find her, he'd go to her friends.

Monday, November 18th, 1987

7:26 PM

Somewhere, deep in the dark, frigid Hawkins, Indiana woods, El Hopper crawled out of the base of a tree, wiping away the slimy membrane she had broken through. She wore what she had been wearing to the bowling alley: a jean jacket over a faded, light pink sweater, light rinse jeans, and her white converse.

Like a newborn deer, she rose on legs she still wasn't quite used to. Stretching, she threw a cold smile of greeting to the world. As she trekked through the woods toward the house she needed to be at, she ran through everything she knew about herself: every word she knew, every relationship she had, what her own backstory was. She was ready. She was hungry for some new entertainment. Hungry for new toys to play with. Hungry.

Hawkins was ripe for the picking.

Tuesday, November 19th, 1987

5:42 AM

El woke up feeling like she'd been dunked in an ice bath. Her body gave a small jolt and her eyes shot open. The first thing she noticed before her eyes fully adjusted to the darkness was the low, comforting hum of a sleepy house: the collective noise of the heater running, the appliances in the kitchen, the subtle energy of a family asleep for the night.

She lifted her head just slightly off of the warm, soft surface it was resting on and looked around. She was in a room, definitely not her own. There were old trophies glinting faintly on the shelves, some movie posters on the wall, pictures on top of a dresser — she couldn't see much else with only the moonlight streaming through the half-curtained window.

She cast her gaze down just a bit to find a mass of fluffy frizziness. And then the face that it was attached to.

El's heart threatened to stop on the spot. She was lying in bed, wrapped around *Mike*. She was cuddling *Mike*. The same Mike she'd had a crush on for ages now.

She began to remember how she'd ended up here. She felt her face go flaming red, blush creeping all the way down her neck. Mike must have thought she was some kind of psychopath. Having a panic attack, then passing out and refusing to let him take her home once she finally woke up. What had she been thinking? There had to have been a better way to go about it than that.

Once she had woken up from her little coma, El had been more exhausted than she'd ever felt in her life. The only thing she could compare it to was when she'd closed the gate on the Mind Flayer.

This, somehow, had felt different. She felt a certain way after she used her powers — it wasn't too different from the tired feeling you'd get after spending a long day in the sun, just exponentially more intense.

What she had felt after passing out in the bowling alley parking lot, though — that had felt like a sickness. It was like a leech, sucking the vitality right from her bones. She'd never felt anything like it.

But now, lying here splayed on top of Mike? She felt great. She felt like she'd actually gotten a good night's sleep.

She did need to get out of here, though. She'd caused Mike enough trouble, and she did not want to suffer through the embarrassment of having to explain herself to him. Inevitably, he would wake up next to the girl that basically forced him to give her refuge for the night and even sleep next to her just because she didn't want to explain her situation to her friends and family.

She'd been so out of it, she had hardly been able to consider what anything she was saying to Mike really meant. She didn't even know if she remembered everything she had said to him last night — she hoped it was nothing too bad.

She took another look at his face. He was so . . . *pretty*, she thought to herself. She knew it wasn't really a word you used to describe boys. At least, not usually. And sure, he was handsome, as far as sixteen-year-old guys went. But there was something gracefully attractive about him that made her think *pretty* and *beautiful*. It was like she could see the kindness, the goodness of his character etched into the shape of his face, the line of his jaw, the tilt of his nose. He had a *good* face. Without her express consent, her eyes danced down to lock onto his lips. She could feel herself being drawn forward. She wanted to kiss him so badly. *You don't even know how to kiss*, she scolded herself, and at the same time, *stop being weird*.

She was being sappy and ridiculous, and she knew it. She'd been watching too many daytime soap operas again. It did feel amazing, though, being this close to him, pressed up against him. He was so warm. She wouldn't have thought he'd be very comfy to rest on, either, considering how slim he was — but he was. He smelled like soap, which she thought was interesting. She'd never been close enough to smell him, and had never given any thought to what he would smell like. He smelled like soap, laundry detergent, and a faint musk that wasn't exactly cologne or deodorant. It was probably just a day's worth of accumulated smells nesting in the curls of his hair. Neither of them had taken a shower last night.

She wanted to lay her head back down and go to sleep. She wanted to stay wrapped in this cocoon of warmth and safety and Mike for all

eternity. But she couldn't. She was sure the only reason Mike had even let her in his room in the first place was because he was so nice and considerate, and she had practically begged him to take her somewhere for the night. She knew they had just met. She knew that he probably didn't want some random, weird, erratically fainting girl wrapped around him. So slowly, gently, carefully, she began to slide away from him and out of the covers. She just hoped he wasn't a light sleeper.

After a bit of a long walk home (Hopper would kill her if he knew she'd walked so far alone at night) El had been able to slip quietly into her house and take a hot shower. She was grateful that her new house was so much closer to everything than the cabin was — the cabin would have been a painfully long walk from Mike's house. As it was, it hadn't been too bad. It was just really cold.

She was also grateful that Hopper slept like a hibernating bear. Him finding her sneaking into the house at six in the morning would have been a nightmare. Especially since she was supposed to be at the Byers' — *shit*, she cursed mentally. She hadn't given her friends a reason for not showing up. Hopefully they hadn't freaked out and told Joyce that something was wrong. She would just have to show up at school and think of an excuse . . . somehow.

She hopped out of the shower and got ready for school as quickly as she could. She knew she only had about another half an hour until Hopper would be up.

After she was ready, she grabbed her skateboard from her room and made her way to school. She had hated learning to skate, but Max had insisted on teaching her. She'd fallen so many times. Eventually, after many scrapes and bruises that she had to hide from Hopper, she'd gotten pretty good at just cruising around. She rarely skated now that Max drove her almost everywhere, but she was glad to have the option, especially today.

She was dreading seeing her friends. She had no idea what she was going to tell them and she was worried they'd already blown everything out of proportion.

While she was nervous to talk to her friends, her heart pounded frenetically at the mere thought of even glimpsing Mike today — and not in a good way.

She didn't have first period with any of her friends. They'd just have to wait until lunch to see her, unless she met them out at the front of the school in the morning like she usually did — which she would most definitely not be doing today. She did have second period with Mike, though . . .

They sat at opposite ends of the room. She'd made sure it was like that on purpose because she'd been so afraid of talking to him at the beginning of the school year. Maybe he didn't even know she was in there. She couldn't recall him ever talking to her or looking her way in that class before, and she kept a pretty low profile. Thankfully, Mrs. Manzone wasn't one to call on random students. El wasn't great at chemistry anyway. It would be embarrassing to have to fumble around answering questions about complicated formulas and equations in front of someone as brilliant as Mike.

Hopefully she'd just be able to slide into chemistry without him noticing, then bolt out as soon as the bell rang.

When she rolled up to the school, hardly anyone was there. She went around back to hang out on the bleachers until first bell rang. Even though it was still freezing, she didn't want her friends to see her. She pulled out her Walkman and started listening to The Cure to kill the time. Her foot tapped restlessly to the beat of "Just Like Heaven." She tried focusing on the lyrics to calm her frenzied thoughts, but they continued to shoot around the inside of her head in an endless game of pinball.

Eventually first bell rang, and she made her way to class before she was too late. First period dragged by, as usual, and she couldn't stop worrying about the rest of the day. She kept trying to think of suitable excuses, but she was just so bad at it. She'd never been a good liar.

First period, miraculously, ended. El didn't have any idea how she was going to get through the rest of the day without making a mess of it. She chewed her lip nervously as she made her way, as slowly as

she could, to Mrs. Manzone's chemistry class.

As she had planned to, she made it to class and slid into her seat just as the late bell rang. She looked over to where Mike sat as discreetly as she could.

He wasn't there.

What could that mean? Was he okay? Did he just want to avoid her so much that he had skipped class entirely?

Oh. Maybe that was it.

El stifled a groan and slumped forward onto her too small desk, resting her head on her arms. She thought about how it had felt to be pressed up against Mike, his arm wrapped tightly around her, her leg thrown carelessly over him, her head on his chest. She thought about how it had felt just this morning.

The warmth of it, the comfort of it. The low, euphoric buzz that had pulsed through her body in that moment, making her forget what it felt like to be cold, to be uncomfortable, to be uncared for.

His chest rising and falling ever so gently, lulling her to sleep. His breath a gentle breeze upon the crown of her head. It was without a doubt one of the best things she'd ever felt. Blush made its way all the way down beyond her collar, even though Mike wasn't in the room.

At the front of the room, Mrs. Manzone droned on about balancing chemical equations.

There was no way El was surviving this day. She set her forehead down against her desk in resigned defeat.

Ten minutes late, someone threw the door open so quickly that the whole class turned to look. Mrs. Manzone stopped her lesson to glare at the offender.

"Michael," she said, hands finding their way automatically to her hips. "Your tardiness has interrupted my lecture and cost us valuable class time. Do you have an excuse for such a late and grand entry?"

she asked him, fixing him with her beady eyes.

Even while El's heart pounded nervously at the sight of Mike, she couldn't stop herself from frowning at Mrs. Manzone. "What a mouth breather," she mumbled at what she thought was an inaudible volume.

"What was that, Miss Hopper?" the old woman croaked indignantly. "Have something to share with the rest of us? Don't think that just because you're the big Chief's daughter that you're above the rules, young lady. I taught Jim just the same as I'm teaching you now, and I won't hesitate to give him a call."

Damn. Her ears are crazy. El blushed, embarrassed she had caused such an outburst from the old woman. She sunk down even further in her chair, unsure of how to respond. Mike looked at her in what seemed to be a sympathetic way.

"I think that was just the wind, ma'am," he said, looking back to Manzone. "It looks like it's gonna storm out there." He glanced out the window. "And no, I don't really have an excuse. I overslept. I'm sorry."

Mrs. Manzone considered him for a moment. Maybe she was wondering why he'd defend a classmate he seemed to have no connection to. Whatever the case, El was simply a swirl of emotions. She wanted to hug Mike for defending her, she wanted to run from him so she didn't have to talk to him, and she wanted to sink through the floor and never come into this classroom again.

"You know the drill, Michael," Manzone said, appearing to forget about El. "You forfeit your participation for the day. Two more tardies from you and your grade will drop a letter for the quarter. Is that clear?"

"Yes ma'am," he replied easily, not really seeming to care. El lifted her head and looked at Mike, a little concerned. That was out of character for him. He cared a good bit about keeping his grades up. He did look preoccupied, though. He kept tapping the side of his leg, and glancing to the side, at . . .

Is he looking at me? Please tell me he's not looking at me, El thought.

"Take a seat," Mrs. Manzone said. Mike sat down in his chair at the front of the room on the left side. All the way in the back right corner, El stared at him, hiding half her face behind her arms on her desk.

Mrs. Manzone continued her lecture, turning to write on the board while she talked. As soon as Manzone continued her lecture, Mike turned and looked directly at El. Her eyes went wide and her heart thudded. He smiled a small smile, and she sat up to reciprocate shyly. She didn't want to be rude, after all. He began mouthing words at her, but she couldn't tell what he was saying.

Something something . . . today? El thought. She shook her head confusedly at him, trying to tell him she didn't get it. He did it again, slower this time, more exaggerated. *Are you today?* El pondered, mouthing it to herself. What did that mean? Mike did it again. *Oh! Are you okay? That must be it.*

For what felt like the fiftieth time that morning, El blushed. She raised her arms and hid behind the sleeves of her sweater, trying not to show him her adoring smile as she nodded reassuringly at him. She'd been such a pushy, needy inconvenience last night, and she'd been totally weird, yet here he was asking if she was okay. Of course he'd ask if she was okay. He was Mike.

"Mr. Wheeler, Miss Hopper," Mrs. Manzone said, hands snapping magnetically back to her hips. "Perhaps we can make googly eyes at each other later and focus on the lesson now, yes?"

Now they blushed together, both going rigid and looking straight ahead at the board.

"That's more like it," Manzone said. "Now, when we introduce a fourth element . . ."

El was thoroughly embarrassed, but she couldn't help but like the fact that Manzone had implied Mike had been making "googly eyes" at her too.

For the rest of the class period, El noticed that Mike would throw quick glances at her every time Manzone turned to the board. She didn't know whether to feel nervous or warm. He could have been looking at her because he thought she was some kind of freak. Or, he could actually be concerned about her since she did kind of pass out after having a panic attack yesterday. Her mind told her that the latter was probably true, but the rest of her was too stubbornly self-conscious to accept it.

And so chemistry dragged on, for completely different, excruciating reasons. Once the bell rang, almost on instinct, El popped up out of her seat, threw her things in her bag, flung it over her shoulder without even zipping it, and darted out of the room as quickly as she could. She made it about ten feet into the hallway before she heard rapid steps gaining on her. "El!"

She stopped, knowing she was just going to have to do this, however it turned out.

"Hey," Mike said more gently to her back, seeing that she was no longer racing through the hall like a maniac. El felt a hand land almost imperceptibly on her shoulder. "Are you really okay?" he asked. "Can we — could we maybe go somewhere and talk?"

Oh no. El's head was swimming so violently she wasn't sure she could even form proper sentences right now. She took a deep breath, turning slowly to face him, causing him to drop his hand. She took in the sight of him from close up for the first time today. Wait . . . that wasn't true. She'd been wrapped around him this morning, staring at his face from like, two inches away. She could feel the heat rise to her face. *Holy shit, just quit it already,* she told her stupid, traitorous body.

Mike was wearing black pants, a white band tee, and a dark green zip up jacket. El thought the color did wonders to make his eyes stand out. His hair was a frizzy mess, like he hadn't done anything to it since he'd woken up, which she guessed he hadn't since he'd overslept. He'd shaved, though. He looked good — a little too good. It threw her off even more.

She realized it was kind of her fault he'd never set his alarm last

night, and she felt guilty. "El?" he said, scrunching his eyebrows in a way that made her insides scream *adorable!*

Oh. Yeah. She kind of needed to say something. "Um, hi." she finally breathed out. "Yes. I mean . . . yeah. We can talk."

Mike smiled softly at her. "Okay," he said. "Uhhh, I've got a spot I go to for lunch sometimes that's kind of quiet. Does that sound good?"

"Sure," she said, heart fluttering nervously. Mike gave her another quick smile and gestured for her to follow him down the hallway. They made their way all the way down to where the indoor amphitheater was, but turned away from it and walked down another hallway. Eventually, they wound up at a set of double doors that opened to reveal a staircase. He held a door open for El and they made their way up the stairs together. When they reached the top, Mike flung open another door and sunlight beamed down onto their heads, making them both squint and shield their eyes as they adjusted.

Mike, to El's surprise, gently grasped her hand and led her out onto the school roof. El was becoming very confused because there were pretty large plants just growing out of the roof like they were sprouting spontaneously from the blacktop cracks. They were in rows like they'd been put there on purpose, and as she got closer she could see tomatoes and . . . *oh*, she thought to herself. She knew what this was: a garden.

Mike led her to a bench that was angled so as to capture a view of both the garden and the trees beyond the school. They sat down together.

"I didn't even know this was up here," El said. "It's . . . nice."

"Yeah," said Mike. "Not many people know about it yet. It's brand new as of, like, a couple weeks ago. I know Mr. Hooper, though. He teaches a couple elective botany classes, and he's the one who planted all these. He told me I could come up here whenever, so I've been eating lunch here somedays just to get away from all the noise."

El nodded. "I could eat up here," she said. "But I kind of forget to

bring a lunch." She dug sheepishly through her backpack and pulled out a bruised banana, sulking as she peeled it open. "I do have this, though."

Mike laughed. "Wow," he said. "That's pitiful. Jane Hopper, destroyer of bullies three times her size and undefeated one-hand shove champion of Hawkins High. Reduced to eating a single banana for lunch. Hard times for our hero."

El was so surprised he was teasing her that she just stared at him for a moment, holding her banana. And then came the laughter. She didn't even know why it was so funny, but she nearly doubled over.

Eventually she stopped shaking, nudging him with her shoulder. "It's El," she said, smiling up at him. "Not Jane." She swore she saw him blush. He looked down bashfully.

"And Striver isn't three times my size," she said. "I'm at least . . . half his size," she finished quietly, sure Mike was probably more accurate with his estimate.

"Yes, you're absolutely massive," he said, smirking at her. He scooted closer to her on the bench, angling himself to look at her like he was about to ask something serious. "So is the banana really because you forgot your lunch, or is it like, a secret special banana that gives you superpowers or something? Oh! You can probably only eat this one kind of banana and nothing else, or else you'll lose your power forever! C'mon, am I getting close?"

El giggled, but she was slightly nervous that he was talking about powers and stuff. Even though she knew he was joking, she always got paranoid when this kind of thing got brought up. It was funny to hear Mike like this, though. He had such a reputation around school, but it was starting to seem like he was just a goofball.

"Mike," she said. He looked at her, questioning. "You're a dork."

He smiled, then rubbed the back of his neck like he was already sure what he was about to say was embarrassing. "Would it be okay if this dork gave you some lunch?" he asked. "Since you forgot yours," he tagged on when she only looked at him with banana in her mouth.

"I can't take your lunch," she said. "You need to eat too."

"Uh," he started kind of awkwardly. "See, the thing is, I kind of packed two lunches this morning since I didn't know if you'd be able to go home before school."

El swallowed the banana she'd been chewing and stared at him. He'd made her a lunch. Is that what he'd said?

"Is that — is that weird, or? I mean, when I woke up you were just gone, and I didn't really know where you were or if you were okay, or . . ." he trailed off, waiting for her.

She blushed a bit at the mention of this morning and her escape from Mike's house. Gosh, she was such an idiot. Again, she remembered what a total freak she'd been yesterday. "I'm so sorry, Mike," she said.

"Sorry? What are you sorry for?" he said, looking genuinely puzzled.

She looked down at her feet, ashamed. "For yesterday," she said. "I freaked out. Then I made you take me to your house. I was . . . tired. Really tired. I don't know what happened. I'm sorry."

Mike didn't reply immediately and she got more and more nervous. She felt the need to keep talking, keep explaining herself. "I — I was too tired to think. I shouldn't have made you do that. You didn't have to. But I kept telling you to. And I woke up and felt bad. And I know I was weird, and wrong, but—"

"El," Mike said, cutting her off. She wasn't typically one to ramble and he could probably tell she was upset.

"You don't have to be sorry about anything," he said. "You weren't wrong or weird. I mean, like you said: you don't even know what happened to you. You blacked out, had some crazy visions or something, and woke up delirious. You didn't make me do anything. Yeah, you kept telling me not to take you home when I wanted to. But I still could've. I *chose* to trust you. Because you asked me to. And it's *okay*. I promise."

El stared at him, dumbfounded. She wanted to hug him. She was still convinced she had asked too much of him.

"Okay . . ." she said slowly. "I'm, um . . . I'm sorry I took your bed, too." She looked down at her feet, embarrassed. She drug her Vans back and forth across the black rooftop, fidgeting. "And that I, um — that I asked you to sleep with me. I guess I was — yeah. Um. Duh-leer-ee-us."

Mike turned slightly pink and scratched at his unbrushed hair. "Uh, delirious, yeah," he said, reassuring her gently. "And um — yeah, that. That wasn't a problem at all. I gave you my bed, you didn't take it. And um — it was . . . it was kind of nice? I mean, nice to have some company and — it was a cold night and stuff, so? Yeah. Definitely okay."

El was strangely reassured to see him having some trouble getting his words out too. And if she wasn't mistaken, he had just said that sleeping in his bed with her had been "nice." Her stomach did flips. She hoped he meant it.

"Oh," he said, remembering something. "Um, here you go." He handed her the lunch he'd made for her this morning. "You know, if that's — if you want it."

El smiled gratefully and took the brown bag. "Thank you, Mike," she said. "You're sweet," she added without really thinking, then went totally red for no reason. Mike looked a little colorful too, though.

And so they sat there under the cool, blue November sky, their clothes solar blankets charging in the sun, the smell of fresh tomatoes and herbs wafting to their noses on the backs of sun beam shafts spearing through the nippy air. They ate their PB&Js and sat in comfortable silence, every so often chatting aimlessly about classes or other school happenings.

The perfect peace that permeated their little sanctuary did not last forever, however. Eventually, they heard the door to the roof open and footsteps reverberate across the open black plane. They both turned to look behind the bench and saw Max striding toward them.

Quickly, El stood up. "Um, can I talk to her alone for a second?" she said hurriedly.

"Sure," Mike said, shrugging.

El moved toward Max before she could reach her and Mike. She met her halfway.

"There you are!" Max said. "Dustin said he saw you walking this way with Mike. I wouldn't have thought to check up here if I didn't have Hooper for that stupid botany—"

"Max I'm so sorry I didn't mean not to come to Will's and I forgot to call but I promise I'm—"

"Woah, woah there," Max said, waving her hands in front of her in a 'time out' gesture. "What are you even talking about? Are you alright?" she asked, holding a hand to El's forehead like a concerned mother. El swatted it away.

"Yes I'm alright," she said. "What are *you* talking about?"

"Did you say you didn't mean not to come to Will's? What does that even mean?" Max asked. "And did you finally change? I mean, I thought it was a little weird you were wearing the same thing you wore yesterday, but I figured you just forgot an overnight bag or something. Are you sure you don't have a fever?" She raised her hand to El's forehead again. El swatted it again.

"No!" she said. "I mean yes! I mean . . . I — I was at Will's last night?"

"Uh . . . duh?" Max said as if it were obvious. "Seriously, I think you're sick. You must be coming down with whatever Will caught last night."

"Will is sick?" she asked, not even knowing which questions to ask now. What in the world was going on? She wasn't at Will's! Was she? Was this just Max's really strange way of trying to tell her that she was covering for her even though she didn't make it to the Byers' last night?

At that moment the bell rang, letting them know they had five minutes to get to class. Mike walked up from behind her, holding her backpack out to her. "We should probably get going," he said. "It's a bit of a walk to most classrooms from here." He continued to hold her

bag while she slipped the straps on, face scrunched up in thorough confusion. "Hey Max," Mike tagged on politely.

"Hey Wheeler. You didn't like, drug her or anything, did you?"

"What?! No!" he said indignantly.

"Max!" El snapped.

"Just making sure!"

8. Chapter 8

Several things:

1. This chapter is wild.
 2. I have not completely edited it, but I think it's pretty much fine.
 3. I finally went back to chapter 7 and completely edited it. At least as much as I'm going to. Nothing changed plot-wise, but there are a few more details, and overall it just reads a lot smoother.
 4. PLEASE let me know what you think of this chapter.
 5. Thanks so much for reading. You're great.
-

El gazed out the windshield of Max's car into the maelstrom of raindrops. They pounded a relentless, staccato rhythm onto the tempered glass. If she stared long and hard enough, her eyes would find that boundary between focused and unfocused, and it looked just like in *Star Wars* whenever the Millennium Falcon made the jump to hyperspace. Rain drops formed into beams, perfect line segments stemming directly from the windshield, vaguely illuminated by the dampened light of the sun behind the veil of storm clouds.

It was Friday and they were headed back to Max's house after a long, test-filled day at school.

El hadn't asked her about what had been on her mind all week. She was beyond confounded by what Max had meant when she'd told her that she'd been at Will's house the night she had actually stayed over at Mike's.

After thinking it over for a long time, she decided that it was probably best if she just didn't bring it up. She had broken a *lot* of rules that night. She wouldn't be going anywhere but school and straight back home for a long time if Hopper found out about

everything that had gone down just a few days ago.

El figured that maybe Max really was just being a good friend and covering for her — but she didn't want to bring it all back up, make a big deal of it, and ruin it. Max didn't know what had happened. If she found out about El's episode at the bowling alley, odds were Hopper or Joyce would hear about it.

Yes, it was best just leave it in the past. It didn't matter. Things were good now, anyway. Mike had continued talking with her at school every day, even helping her with their chemistry homework at lunchtime.

Interacting with Mike on a regular basis was great. It was amazing, actually. But El hadn't considered what it would really be like if they started to become friends — kind of like she thought they were right now. At least she hoped they were.

Getting to actually know him was something that, before about a week ago, she wasn't sure would ever even happen. But now it was a reality. And instead of just having a vague idea of who he was by piecing together rumors and stories from school, and watching him from afar, she was beginning to see who the *real* Mike Wheeler was.

Around school, he had become something of a legend: nerd extraordinaire turned rock star prodigy. But that didn't define him at all, she was coming to realize. He was a normal person, with normal person feelings, normal person worries, cares, mannerisms . . . he was kind of — well, normal.

But at the same time, he wasn't. He was incredibly considerate. He was unfailingly generous. He was passionate — about music, about science, about movies that he loved, about people that he cared for. He was so smart. He killed every subject, flagging only a little in English, which he didn't have as much love for.

He was honestly a huge dork. El had begun to think of him this way, but in the most endearing manner she possibly could. He was adorably awkward in ways that even she, severely lacking in social skills, could recognize. He could babble on about radios, D&D, and *Star Wars* for impressively long amounts of time. He cracked jokes so

lame that they were actually hilarious. And he wasn't particularly ashamed about any of it.

It was so obvious that he belonged with Will, Dustin, and Lucas. Her heart ached to know that their friendship had once been as strong as could be.

There were unexpected issues that came along with befriending Mike.

She didn't know what to do with her feelings. She got to spend time with him, talk with him, see him more often than she ever had before — it was more than she had ever realistically hoped for. And, most of the time, it was great. They got along so easily. She felt like they understood each other in a way that didn't need to be put into words.

But still . . . she found herself wanting more than friendship. She didn't know why she couldn't just be happy with being around him. It should've been enough. In many ways, it was. But her longing for him still drove her crazy. A part of her thought that if she'd never gotten a taste of what it could be like that one night at his house, she wouldn't be so bad off now. She knew she should just be grateful to become his friend. She really was, too.

"What are you thinking over there, space cadet?" Max asked, jarring El back to the present. Rain still pounded down on the car, but she could see that they were almost to Max's house.

El ran a hand down her face. She was more tired than she'd realized. She'd stayed up pretty late last night studying for her pre-calculus exam. Math was actually a subject that she'd proven to be a bit of a natural in. Words were hard since she'd gotten such a late start, but numbers made a lot of sense and just took some thought to figure out. Math problems were like puzzles. She liked solving them. If she didn't know a word, though, she just didn't know it.

"I failed McAlister's test on *The Great Gatsby*. I just know I did," she said. "There was an essay. It's always so embarrassing when there's an essay," she added with a groan. "I'm so bad at writing, Max."

"Oh, c'mon," Max said. "El, you've gotta give yourself some credit, okay? You didn't actually start learning English until you were like

thirteen! It's insane how far you've come! I'm totally not joking around when I say I'm seriously impressed with how well you've learned to speak. It's actually pretty freaky."

El looked down, trying to hide a smile. "I'm not that good . . ." she mumbled. She hadn't been fishing for a compliment — she'd honestly only been trying to dodge a conversation about Mike, and her latest failure in English was definitely still fresh on her mind.

Max pulled onto her street and rolled up to the house. "Oh, shit. I'm so sorry, El," she said. "I totally thought Billy would already be gone to his girlfriend's for the weekend."

"It's okay," El shrugged. "We'll just go to your room."

El wasn't really afraid of Billy. He could be erratic and explosive at times, but she knew he wouldn't be able to hurt her if he tried. Besides, Max seemed to think he'd calmed down a lot ever since he'd started dating his new girlfriend, Leah.

"Jeez, it's still pouring," Max said. "You ready?"

The girls got out of the car in sync, running up to the front door to avoid getting soaked as best they could. Max threw the door open and they trudged inside onto the wooden floor, dripping everywhere despite their best efforts. Billy looked over at them from the couch. He was sitting and watching TV, sipping a beer. He stared at them for a moment, looking down at the sizable puddle they were creating, then back up to their faces. He took another sip of beer.

"Let me grab some towels," he said, after what felt like an eternity. The girls looked at each other, then back to Billy. Slowly, he finished off his beer, set the can down on the coffee table and got up, stretching his arms way over his head, groaning. He cracked his knuckles and shook his head, as if he were trying to clear it.

"Damn I'm tired," he said. He rubbed an arm across his face. "Alright. I'll be right back."

He walked off, hopefully to get towels, not a bat to bludgeon them with for dripping all of over the floor.

Again, Max and El looked at each other. Max raised her eyebrows at El in a *see what I mean?* kind of way.

"He does seem different," El conceded.

"Uh, yeah, you think?"

Just a moment later, Billy, walked back in with three towels. He handed two to the girls.

"Alright, go ahead and dry off," he said. "Then get outta my way so I can get the puddle."

Max and El just stood there, staring at him as if he had a serious concussion. "Uh, hello there?" he said in what was more of his normal, agitated tone. "You could always take a picture, ladies. I do charge, though." He gave a false, toothy smile. "Now if you don't mind?"

Glancing at each other again, they dried themselves off quickly before removing their shoes and walking around Billy to go to Max's room. All the while they kept stealing looks behind them at Billy, bent over by the front door, diligently mopping up their impressively large puddle.

"Oh!" he said, before they made it to the room. They jolted a bit, turning back around to face him as he stood like he'd remembered something. "Max, your mom told me that we're on our own for dinner tonight. My dad had some kind of conference and she went with him. I'm not bringing any food home because I'm going to that party concert thing at the Brewers' tonight, so you and Jane are just gonna have to fend for yourselves."

"Alright," Max said unusually slowly. "Thanks . . . for letting me know."

"Sure, whatever," he said, throwing the wet towel over his shoulder and gathering their used ones from off the floor. "Just don't leave a huge mess if you two decide to cook something. I'm not cleaning that shit."

He walked back toward the laundry room. "You girls can have the

TV," he said over his shoulder. "I'll be in my room until I leave."

Max stood there for another second, watching him disappear down the hallway. Then she shook her head and gestured for El to follow her into her room. She closed the door behind them and threw her backpack down on the floor.

"Something is seriously wrong with him," she said.

"He seems fine to me," El said. "He was . . . nice."

"That's exactly what I mean," Max said.

El's mind was elsewhere, though. Something Billy said had made her feel like she was forgetting something. *The Brewers' party . . . Friday night*. Why did that sound so familiar to her?

Max plopped down on her bed. "So," she said, and El could already tell what she was about to ask about by the tone of her voice and the gossipy, excited look on her face. "How are things with Mike?"

Oh! Mike! Now it was coming back to her. Earlier in the week, the drummer from Mike's band had invited her to the Brewers' house party. He'd said that they played their *other* songs at these kind of house parties, whatever that meant.

"The party that Billy's going to," El said, not at all intending to answer Max's question. "I want to go."

"What?" she said. "Why?"

El looked down. There was no way to get around this one. "Mike's playing," she mumbled.

Instead of ribbing her like El figured she would, Max just sighed. El looked at her. She looked tired.

"El," she began. El had noticed that Max had taken to the nickname Mike gave her. She liked it.

"I don't think it's safe," she went on. "The concert was one thing. A party . . . yeah, okay, there's going to be music. But people still might

want to talk to you. Ask you questions. Someone might start getting a little too curious about you. It could be dangerous."

El deflated. She knew Max was probably right. She just felt that if she missed even one opportunity to see Mike, everything would be ruined. She knew it was irrational. Still, she couldn't help feeling it.

"Shit," Max said. "Why do you have to pout like that? Seriously? Who's idea was it to make you? You're not even fair, you know that?"

El was taken aback by her friend's outburst. "I thought you said my puppy dog face doesn't work on you," she said, a faint grin creeping onto her face.

"Yeah, well," Max said, clearly exasperated. "I guess that was a lie. You suck."

El just laughed. She hadn't meant to look so morose.

"How bad do you want to go?" Max asked.

"Max, we don't have to—"

"How bad?" Max persisted.

El fiddled with the hem at the bottom of her shirt. "Pretty bad," she said.

Max threw her hands up in the air. "Well, you only live once, right? Whatever. Let's just get ready and go before I change my mind."

El remained rooted to the floor, eyes completely wide.

"El!" Max said.

"Yep! Okay! Getting ready!"

After an unnecessary amount of time spent trying on different outfits, a quick stop for some greasy brown bag burger takeout, a couple of errands for Max's parents, and a stop back at Max's house so El could brush her teeth (she would not be caught talking to Mike with burger

breath or lettuce in her teeth) the girls were ready for the party.

They pulled up to the Brewers' house as the sky was transitioning from a navy-tinted dull glow to a deeper, more oppressive darkness. It was a starless, moonlight night. The air hung stagnant and dense as the girls got out of the car. El felt as if she had to push the door harder to open it, like the molecules floating around were pushing back, unhappy about being disturbed.

There was an unbelievable amount of cars surrounding the Brewers' house and lining the street for what seemed like miles down the road in either direction. It was like an army had come to infiltrate the surprisingly normal sized house. El wasn't sure how so many people would fit inside. She could see many of her peers milling about in the front yard talking, drinks in hand, laughter and loud chatter filling the air.

As she and Max approached the house she saw couches had been moved to the garage and set up around a table where a lively game of beer pong was going. She saw a white ball arc over the table, finding its way into a red Solo cup without so much as a brush of the rim. "Swish!" she heard, accompanied by some general cheering.

They approached the front door, which seemed to stay perpetually open since so many people were constantly sliding in and out. Max squeezed her way in, mumbling something about stupid track and field boys thinking the doorway was a great place for a conversation.

The house was absurd. It was cold outside, but the first thing El noticed other than the dizzying amount of people that were in the house was how warm it was inside, even with the door open. She was convinced that every person in the house was probably touching at least two other people at all times, even if arms were tucked in and shoulders were scrunched together. Such a conglomeration of body heat formed into one combined mass emanated a sauna-like wave of warmth that rolled off of this sardine can nightmare and roved through the house like it was a convection oven.

A veil of cigarette smoke hung in the air just below the ceiling, like the house's very own indoor stratosphere. Beer sloshed from cans and cups at random, seeping its way into both clothes and the poor,

doomed carpet that, honestly, had a laughably slim chance of surviving the night without being ruined in every room. El didn't understand how someone could have a party like this. The house would be absolutely disgusting afterwards.

"Where's Mike?" she asked, more angry than she'd ever been that she was short. She couldn't see a thing over this ocean of bodies.

"Hell if I know," Max yelled back. "I'm sure he's probably set up in like the living room," she said.

At that moment, a screeching, high pitched whine filled the house, making everyone groan and grab for their ears on instinct. This meant a lot of spilled beer and a lot of sudden arguments and shoving because of said spilled beer.

And then the chatter died down a bit as a disembodied, amplified voice that El recognized filled the space.

"Is this thing on?" the detached voice of Mike Wheeler said. "Sorry about that. We're gonna get started here in a minute, so, you know. Get yourself a spot and say whatever else you need to say because you won't be able to hear in a minute."

There was some laughter, and everyone packed in tighter ahead of El and Max, deeper in the house. The ceaseless deafening roar of hundreds of indistinguishable conversations lulled to a more average volume. El looked at Max.

"How do we get up there?" she asked.

Max rolled her eyes, grabbing her friend's hand. "Excuse me!" she said, practically shoving people aside to get in front of them. "Sorry! Yep. Watch out!" She continued to drag El through the house, yanking on her arm to pull her through a wall of people that did not actually appear to be moveable. They moved forward, though, unpleasant as it was to squeeze through about a hundred different strangers' bodies. It reminded El of those cartoons where the characters got shoved into something impossibly small, like a jar or an air vent.

Just as El thought she'd lose the ability to breath from the sheer lack of air in between each body, they reached a bit of a clearing. The front few rows of people were primarily girls, who were almost all somewhere around Max and El's height, meaning they could actually see a bit of the band set up in the corner of the living room. El could just barely see Mike's head.

"Alright," he said into the microphone, looking out at the crowd. El could've sworn she could *feel* the hold he had on them. Immediately, everyone quieted down like it was some kind of unspoken rule. Most of them had probably come to these parties before. They knew they wouldn't want to miss what was about to go down.

"Let's go," Mike said.

And they began to play.

Mike was so glad he was drunk. He needed this. He'd been needing this since . . .well.

The image of the room in front of him was pleasantly unclear, his eyes unwilling to focus on any one fixed point. It was all of blur of color and light and deafening, bone vibrating noise.

He always looked forward to these house parties, sometimes even more than actual concerts. There weren't parents here to grill him about his lyrics or the volume, about being so obvious about drinking while he was playing. There was no pressure. He didn't care about messing up or having to impress anyone. He was only here for the free beer and the opportunity to play so loud that he couldn't form a single coherent thought.

He couldn't deny that it felt good to sing songs that felt a just a little more honest, too. These nights were his chance to get more raw, more angry. It was therapeutic in maybe a bit of a messed up way, but he knew that it was better than the drugs one of his former bandmates had introduced him to. Getting off that shit had been one of the most painful experiences of his life. *Huh*, he thought. *Guess its only fitting that I'm playing this song right now.* He sang the chorus to "Bath Salts," a little more contemplative than usual on a night like

this.

He couldn't figure out what had been up with his head lately. His brain had been on overdrive for like a week now, and for some reason he felt the need to evaluate and reevaluate every aspect of his life.

No . . . he did know why. It was just that he had only recently began, very slowly, to accept that he knew the reason why he'd been so wigged out lately.

It was El.

They'd been hanging out and talking at school every day since *the incident*, and she had wormed her way into his heart so fast that he didn't even know what to think about how he felt.

She was so sweet, and good, and innocent. In many ways she seemed almost as pure and unblemished as a child — but there was something far deeper there, as well. She wasn't perfectly innocent. She wasn't naive. It was clear to Mike just from talking to her that she knew pain and suffering just as well as anyone else would. Maybe even better. There was something oddly mature and wise about her. He could tell that she'd experienced a lot of the badness the world had to offer.

He connected with her in a way that he never had with anyone else. There was absolutely no judgment between them whatsoever. He felt like he was free to be entirely himself around her, and she seemed genuinely invested and interested to get to know him even after he proved to be a completely lame dork.

And it was great. They'd been becoming better friends, and things were . . . great. So why did he still feel completely awful and pissed off at the universe? What was wrong with him?

He thought he'd figured it out: he wasn't going to be able to be okay with just being El's friend for very long. His feelings for her were already reaching a point that made it painful to see her without admitting it to her. And at this point, he hardly knew her.

He couldn't tell her that he was beginning to like her . . . a lot. A whole lot. Probably more than would be acceptable this early in their friendship.

He knew a girl like her deserved someone so much more . . . *together* than him. He'd been a mess for a while now, and she — well, he'd never met another girl like her.

What song was he even on? Shit. He really needed to stop this.

Somehow he returned to reality to realize that his hands were still playing his guitar like they had minds of their own. He looked around at his bandmates to see if he'd messed anything up when he'd zoned out. They were all wrapped up in playing like nothing was wrong. Mike made a skeptical face like he couldn't believe it hadn't been an irreparable catastrophe, but he focused on finishing the song.

He played a final, reverberating chord, letting it ring while everyone cheered. The collective noise from the crowd was so loud within the confined walls of the house that it seemed a fair rival to the music.

Mike realized that he was in a bit of a different mood now. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to go on playing these songs all night like he usually did. He paused to take a sip of water, surveying the crowd in front of him for once, feeling slightly more sober.

And then he saw her. Just the tip of her head at first, really. He almost laughed at how easily he'd recognized her given only her hairline to go off of. With annoyance, he realized that even something as normally unexciting as the top of her head was cute to him.

She was leaning back and forth, trying to get a better view through the heads of the girls in front of her. She looked very frustrated, her eyebrows scrunched together and her lips pushed down in a little frown. It was adorable. Mike snorted as he took another sip of water out of his cup. He set it down on his amp and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Hey, girls," he said into the microphone. All of the girls in the vicinity looked at him expectantly, all at once. "Uummm," he said. He

pointed. "Sorry, you two, right there. Yeah! You. Would you mind letting the girl behind you through to the front?" The girls both looked behind them in surprise at El, who probably looked even more surprised than them. They stepped apart slowly, giving her as much room as they could. El stepped cautiously to the front, like she was trying to avoid stepping on a snake or a bear trap.

Eventually, she stopped right next to the microphone, fidgeting with her hands down in front of her, glancing shyly up at Mike.

"Hi El," he said, and then realized he was still talking into the mic. She smiled at him, laughing. He stepped to the side so it wouldn't pick him up.

"Hi Mike," she said.

"How did you even know about this party? I didn't tell you, right?"

El's brows furrowed. "The drummer told me," she said, pointing at the boy. "Did you not want me to come?" she asked, starting to sound a little hurt.

"Oh, no! That's not what I meant! Or I mean . . . kind of, yeah, it is. Wait, that sound wrong. What I mean is—"

He sighed, grabbing the bridge of his nose. She looked at him, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"I'm really happy to see you," he said. "I guess I just didn't want you to come because — because I was kind of nervous for you to see this side of my music."

"Why?" she asked. "It's amazing."

"Wha—oh, really, amazing, huh, okay, wow," he mumbled, all at once astonished, flattered, and embarrassed. He really needed to get a hold of himself.

He looked her in the eye, and in that moment he wanted nothing more than to leave this place and go somewhere quiet and comfortable just to be with her. Just to talk to her.

"Shouldn't you keep playing?" she asked, concern edging into her voice.

"Oh," he said. "Yeah, I guess."

He didn't know how he'd get back into the setlist he had planned now. She'd come in and warmed him right to his core. He felt like his insides had been melted into a gooey, sappy mess. He was really, truly happy to see her. He was high on her compliment. He felt good.

He wanted to play something else.

"El," he said.

"Yes?"

"Do you like to dance?"

"Dance?" she asked, looking around. "In here?"

He took a look around and saw what she meant. The place was packed.

"Alright, I admit, it's not optimal," he said. "But party dancing is a little different. You just kind of . . . jump up and down and let loose. I think it may work out."

El looked back at the crowd. "It may," she said.

"How would you feel about some music to dance to?" he asked. "Or would you rather I keep playing songs like the ones we just did?"

El smirked at him. "I like to dance," she said.

Looking at her in that moment, his whole body was on fire. Suddenly he needed to see her dance more than he needed anything in the world. He needed it like a drowning man clawing his way to the surface for oxygen.

Mike couldn't help the huge grin on his face. "Let's dance, then," he said. He moved back behind the microphone stand.

Mike motioned for the band in for a quick huddle around the drum set.

"Golden," he said. "Then we'll just see where we go from there."

They all nodded, grinning. "It's different," Johnny said. "I'm good with it."

Mike came back to the mic. "We're back," he said.

The crowd roared in response. "FINALLY!" a random male voice boomed.

El was still smiling at him.

"We're gonna play something a little different, if that's okay," he said. "You guys like to dance?"

He about had to cover his ears at the response. Honestly, he was convinced that he could say anything and they'd cheer in response. They were probably drunk enough.

Mike started the song, soft. The crowd quieted immediately. And then the band came in.

Suddenly the immensely dense mass of bodies in front of him became one being that bounced up and down off of the floor in perfect time with the upbeat tempo. The only thing that crossed his mind in the moment was surprise that the floor didn't break open beneath them like a trap door under the astonishing amount of weight being thrown at it every half second.

Still sort of drunk, his mind conjured images of the floor exploding at the force of hundreds of high schoolers landing, splintering open to reveal an alternate dimension, swirled in layers of luminous stars of varying colors, diamond pinheads cast upon a vaguely purplish canvas of infinite space.

What Mike was seeing in front of him, though, was undoubtedly the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life.

El, like everyone else in the room, was jumping up and down with

the beat. Her hair bounced with her, splaying out around her head as she moved up and down, side to side. Her delicate lips were curled in a permanent smile, the dimples he admired so much fixed firmly upon her face. She looked more carefree and shameless than he'd ever seen her.

She moved her arms with the flow of the music. Some of the movements were familiar to Mike, like she'd learned them watching movies or TV. Some of them were clearly just "semi-intoxicated teenage girl at a party flailing her arms around randomly," and Mike was loving every second of it. Every few moments he would catch a glimpse of her eyes and feel like his insides had been thrown in a microwave for a few seconds. They gleamed with the deep warmth that he always found in them, like thermal pools.

Mike jumped up and down himself as the band moved from song to song. He didn't take his eyes off of El the whole time they played, and the shameless, toothy smile he displayed refused to leave his face.

He wished he could dance with her. He didn't even really know how and he was sure he'd look like a dork. He didn't care. She was gorgeous.

Eventually, Mike decided that he would play until the sun came up if this was the way it would continue to go. He couldn't recall a night he had ever enjoyed more. The party hadn't dwindled in the slightest, and the house was just as packed as it had been when they started. A lot of the kids who hadn't been able to fit inside were gathered outside around the windows to the living room, which had been opened.

He would remember this night for a long, long time.

As they launched into the next song, Mike took the opportunity to break from jumping around everywhere, catching his breath. The view from where he was standing was insane. He was tall enough to see the tops of most of the heads in the room. It was packed so tight that it was a wonder the walls didn't collapse from all the weight pressed against them. *This is definitely a fire hazard*, he thought to himself, smirking.

The guys eased into the next song, letting themselves and their peers rest for a minute. Mike had been slightly nervous about changing up the style so suddenly on everyone. Everyone knew that he tended to play his heavier, more experimental music at these parties, and they looked forward to it. But as he looked out at the sea of high schoolers before him, all swaying gently to the shimmering sound of "Poems," he guessed he'd been worried about nothing.

Good music was good music, no matter what genre or category it happened to fall under. He'd spent what felt like an eternity perfecting these songs. He was proud of them. He'd gotten a record deal because of them.

That was another thing that scared him, though. He looked at El, swaying gracefully from side to side, one hip pushing smoothly outward, then the other. His attention moved upward to land on her little, upturned nose. He hated the fact that he wasn't able to do anything about his attraction to her at the moment.

But what if he did? What if he did tell her how he was beginning to feel about her? Say that, by some miracle, she was just as interested in him as he was her. Say that they started dating and everything went perfect.

First of all, Mike thought, that's a lot of hypotheticals.

Even if all of those impossibilities came to pass . . . would she want to stay with him if he ended up constantly touring around after high school? What would happen then? Would it just end? All be for nothing?

You're getting way ahead of yourself.

He'd always had an overactive imagination. He'd always been a dreamer and, embarrassingly, somewhat of a hopeless romantic. He knew all these thoughts about El were probably just the result of his own stupid delusions and that he should probably let it go. He was lucky to be her friend, and he knew it. He needed to learn how to be okay with just being her friend.

They were coming to the close of the song, playing the last loud

chorus. Mike looked back up and focused on the room in front of him. As he sang, something strange began to happen.

There was a lot of movement from the back of the room. Heads jostled around like the canopies of trees in a windy forest. The commotion spread like a plague, slowly creeping forward toward the band. Mike didn't know what was going on, but he was resolved to finish the song. As the song wound down, so did the volume, and Mike was prepared to pluck the soft outro.

He didn't get the chance. Shrill, visceral screams pierced the air, cracking the glittery, glossy veneer of high school party bliss that had laid over the room until now.

Everyone started looking around frantically, varying degrees of worried, confused, annoyed, and scared.

"Everyone get out, get out, GET OUT NOW!"

At this, the crowd sobered further. Mike removed his guitar from around him, unplugging it and setting it down in the case that lay open against the wall. On instinct, he looked at El. She wore a face he'd never seen on her before. She looked worried and surprised, but there was something else to it. She didn't seem exactly *scared*. There was a kind of determination in her features. A hard kind of vigilance.

"Holy shit! Oh my . . ."

"Someone call an ambulance!"

"RUN, RUN, RUN!"

All hell broke loose. Those closest to the source of the commotion started screaming, trying as hard as they could to get out of the house somehow. The result was a domino effect that knocked a lot of people over, the people falling over knocking even more people over in turn. Those still on their feet trampled over the ones on their butts, looking for any exit. Mike heard squeals of pain and strings of panicked cursing.

He still didn't understand what was going on. He tried to stand on his toes to see what was happening, but the place had turned into a

mound of termites. Everyone was moving in all different directions, some going for the windows, some for the front door. They crawled over and across each other with no concern for anyone else.

The shock began to wear off.

"HEY!" he said into the microphone. "Everyone just calm down! If we need to get out of the house we've got to do it together or we'll never make it out of here!"

No one paid him any mind. The frenzy only intensified, and screams from one section of the house close to the bathroom grew louder.

"It was her!" he heard a male voice yell above the rest of the noise.

"She did it! Hey! SHE DID IT!"

Who did what? Mike had a bad feeling about this.

For some reason the chaos quieted for just a moment as this voice yelled for everyone's attention. Everything went slow. Mike could feel his heart thud in his chest. A bead of sweat traced down his neck.

"IT WAS HER! JANE HOPPER! THE CHIEF'S DAUGHTER! I SAW HER COME OUT OF THE BATHROOM AFTER GUTTING JENNY ADAMS WITH A KNIFE! THEN SHE GOT TRENT CAUSE HE NOTICED TOO!"

What?

What?!

Mike's eyes snapped to El. Her eyes were already locked on his, wider than ever. Now she looked scared.

People around her and Mike that knew who she was began to look at her confusedly. Most of them had probably noticed that she'd been right in front of Mike the whole night. She hadn't even been back toward the bathroom.

Then something happened. The screams bounced off the walls again, guttural and terrified. Much of the crowd near the back fell over, trying to back away from something coming from the back hallway.

And then, in the uninterrupted line of vision he was granted, Mike saw it.

It was El. She had a kitchen knife. It was bloody. Her arm was bloody.

Sure he'd completely lost it, he looked back to El . . . about four feet in front of him.

Had he been drugged?

What happened next landed he and El straight in the middle of a violent, high school thriller movie.

The El in the back of the room continued moving toward the mass of kids in front of her, forcing them to scamper back as quickly as they could. Someone broke through the closed window by the front door with a lamp. A few people jumped through.

The screams made it almost impossible to communicate with anyone. But one voice rose above the rest.

"SHE'S A MURDERER! I SAW IT! GET HER! GET JANE HOPPER!"

And that was all it took for the crowd around El and Mike to give up their doubts. Many of those closest to her screamed and backed away. But not everyone did. A ring of people began to form around her, obviously hoping to subdue her.

Was that all they would do? Subdue her? Mike doubted it. It would not end well if they got a hold of her.

She began backing up slowly toward the band as Mike saw the other El continue to force most of the party out of the house. Apparently the group of on-the-spot heroes currently surrounding El hadn't seen her murderous twin sister with the gory knife.

El — the *real* El. Needed to get out of here. There were about ten people converging on her as she continued to back up. She backed up right into Mike's chest and jolted, whipping around to look at him, completely rigid. He grabbed her shoulders and moved her so that she was behind him.

"Back off, you guys," he said in a low, reasoning tone. "She didn't do anything."

"Bullshit, Wheeler," a football jock he didn't recognize answered, still edging forward. "You heard them back there. Multiple witnesses. Someone's not just gonna make up some screwed up shit like that. We're gonna make sure she gets the justice her police chief papa will never give her, so just step aside."

Mike had been reaching down to his guitar case. His fingers wrapped around the all too familiar neck of his Fender, electricity pulsing through him.

"What are you gonna do?" the jock asked. "Beat us over the head with your guitar?"

"Uh, yep," said Mike. "That was the plan."

And the boy lunged at him, arms out wide, ready to take him down to the ground. Before his hands even got close to Mike, the thick, solid wooden body of a bass guitar slammed into the side of his skull, the force knocking him sideways and to the ground, unconscious.

Mike looked over to his bassist, Jack, gratefulness written across his features. Jack winked at him. His band still had his back.

A guy in a track team jacket yelled and charged forward, spurring on the rest of the group gathered around them. Mike swung his guitar up and out of his case, directly onto the head of track boy with a sickening thud. The guitar's neck snapped in half, the body still dangling off the strings. The boy's eyes rolled into the back of his head as he slumped forward.

And then everything was a blur. They were rushed by the rest of the group and Mike saw Johnny come up from behind him and slam a snare drum into some senior's head. Jack picked up the microphone stand and started brandishing it like a spear, holding off three guys at once. As Mike was distracted by what was going on around him, he let his guard slip.

Greg Saunders, one of the beefiest guys on the wrestling team

slammed into him without warning, sending him straight onto his back, his head hitting the floor. Mike groaned as Greg pounced onto him, pinning him with his weight. The boy reared back to deliver a blow that Mike was sure would knock him back to last century. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited, but instead of the feeling of his nose break, Mike felt Greg's weight ripped off of him like he'd been grabbed by the Hulk.

He opened his eyes and sat up, his friends still fending off the rest of their hostile peers. Mike looked straight ahead to see Greg halfway embedded into the drywall, his hair full of powder, shards and chunks of the wall all over his body. Mike looked around him, trying to understand what had happened. As he stood, he bumped into El behind him. That look was back in her eyes. The determined one. She was bleeding from her nose.

They needed to get out of here. Like, now.

While Jack was still distracting some of them with the mic stand, Nathan, the lead guitarist picked up his bottle of tequila and slammed it into one of the remaining attackers' heads. Jack turned the mic stand horizontal and shoved the remaining two boys over onto their butts.

"Guys!" Mike yelled. "Let's go! Now!"

He grabbed El's hand and ran to the window that was behind Johnny's drum set. He helped her climb out first, then followed. He made sure his bandmates made it out, then edged his way along the side of the house to peek into the front yard, keeping a firm grasp of El's hand.

The front of the house was still chaos, the last of the stragglers just making it out. Mike didn't know where the murder El was, but everyone was running to get into their cars or simply running away. Just then, a siren could be heard and flashing blue and red lights appeared around the bend in the road. Jim Hopper's truck pulled up in front of the house. He parked in the middle of the road and got out, looking around at the madness surrounding him. His eyes locked onto some of the only people who weren't sprinting away: a couple of girls kneeling in the yard, holding onto each other and sobbing. They

were covered in blood.

Mike could hardly hear him from this far away with all that was still going on.

"What happened here?" the chief asked the girls.

One of them, who Mike recognized as Sophie from the cheerleading squad, looked up to glare at the chief.

"Your *fucking daughter* happened, that's what," she spat at him.

Hopper looked like he'd been delivered a physical blow. He reeled back.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"She stabbed Jenny to death in the bathroom," Sophie said, a war between hatred and anguish evident in her voice. "We tried to stop the bleeding, but . . ."

Mike felt El squeeze his hand. He looked at her, up against the side of the house behind him. Tears were running down her cheeks.

"My dad can help us," she said. "We need to get his attention."

Mike shook his head. "No way," he said. "With this many people around? It'll be impossible for him to get us away from here without someone noticing."

Sure enough, a group of boys approached the chief, presumably to back up what the girls had told him. Those that weren't busy getting away slowly gathered around him, all yelling information and questions at him.

"Maybe you're right," El said. "But what do we do? We can't get to your car either, can we? And Max's car . . . Max!"

"What about Max?" Mike asked. "You came with her?"

"Yes," El said. "But I lost her after you told those girls to let me up front. I need to find her! She might be hurt!"

"El, I'm sure she's okay. We need to worry about getting you safe right now. Pretty soon, all of Hawkins is going to think you're a murderer. I'm not sure how much your dad is going to be able to do about that."

Mike felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Johnny. "Hey man," he said. "You and her got some place to go? Me and the guys decided that we're removed enough from all this. We'll probably be good if we just head home. But you guys . . . are you gonna be alright?"

"I've got a place in mind, Johnny, thanks. I owe you my life for that back there, man. I owe all of you," he said, looking at his band.

They exchanged some handshakes and hugs and the guys went on their way, splitting up and trying to look as natural as possible.

"El," Mike said. He could feel her shaking. "We're going to make sure Max is okay. Alright? I promise. But first we've got to get you out of here."

She looked at him. Slowly, she nodded.

"Remember when you asked me to trust you?" he asked. "That night after the bowling alley?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, do you think you can trust me right now?"

"Yes."

And so they ran off into the inky, starless night together, hand in hand through backyards and across streets, headed to the only place Mike could think to hide her in for the night.

SETLIST:

Here's the thing. Not all of you will listen to this. I hope you do. If you choose to, please listen to it LOUD — especially to do the second half of the set any justice. That is my humble request.

Cleopatricks — Hometown (makes one reference to a "text," which is obviously a bit anachronistic. I'm including it for the rest of the lyrics and its tone, though, which I think is great for this story and Mike's character. It's also not hard to imagine Mike singing the word "call" instead of "text," so it's not bad at all.)

Highly Suspect — Bath Salts

Himalayas — Thank God I'm Not You

Nothing But Thieves — I'm Not Made By Design

Cage The Elephant — In One Ear (this is where the title comes from. There's also a line about dropping out of school which I'm literally going to write an explanation for into the story so that this song fits. There's also a line about being a Gen X-er, which Mike actually is, so that's cool.)

DANCE PARTY!

Hippo Campus — Golden

Hippo Campus — Suicide Saturday

Hippo Campus — Way it Goes

Hippo Campus — Buttercup

Hippo Campus — Poems (interrupted at the very end when murder!El murders some folks. Such a buzzkill.)

Yes, I am just shoving Hippo Campus in your face, and no, I have absolutely no shame. You are so, so welcome.

9. Chapter 9

El followed Mike for miles and miles.

They cut through sleeping neighborhoods, across shadow laden backyards, into patches of pitch black forest.

They started out jogging their way through Hawkins, constantly throwing paranoid looks over their shoulders, jumping at every rustle of the bushes lining the sides of houses, or the leaves carpeting the forest floor.

Gradually, they used up all of the adrenaline that had fueled them since the nightmarish incident at the Brewers' house party. Both huffing and puffing, lungs and throats burned by the chilly midnight air, they looked at each other and silently agreed to slow their pace to a walk.

El didn't know how much longer they had to go, but she could feel her heels beginning to blister, her feet so sore she wanted to tell Mike to stop so she could rest. She didn't, though. She knew in her gut that if she stopped it would be the end of her, and probably Mike too. They would find her. They would catch her. They would leap from the shadows, from behind the trees. They'd rise from the bushes. They'd stalk toward her slowly, and there'd be too many for her to do anything about it.

She wasn't sure if she'd ever felt more vulnerable. Mike was right: if all of Hawkins didn't already think she was a murderer, they would by morning. Word spread fast in places like this, and there had been enough people at the party to inform the whole town within the hour.

It hadn't sunk in yet. She couldn't cry, she couldn't despair. She could hardly feel anything but the need to be somewhere safe right now.

They had been walking on a winding dirt path for a while now, having left any sign of civilization maybe a couple of miles ago. The path was like a hiking trail. It was steep, climbing and climbing before hitting a switchback and turning to climb in the opposite

direction.

El watched her high-top Vans hit the dirt. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot. She let her mind go blank as she dragged herself up this never ending mountain. Her right calf cramped, a painful tremor. She hugged herself as a shiver shot through her body, the cold air biting through her clothes as if they were paper.

She looked up and noticed that the bank of clouds had rolled away to reveal a smattering of stars. The sky was sewn full of blazing light. The image of a prodigious, all-powerful being invaded El's mind. She recalled the Greek myths that enamored her in history class. Her imagination conjured a Zues-Like god, clad in gleaming bronze, grasping a behemoth handful of glitter, casting it out across the skies to hang suspended in space.

She dropped her gaze back to the path where Mike was still trudging forward — or more like upward. She felt like her body might simply lock up due to the cold and her exhaustion. Was cold exhaustion a thing? She was pretty sure heat exhaustion was.

"Mike," she said, speaking for maybe the third time since they'd left the party behind. Her voice was embarrassingly shaky, but she couldn't help shivering. "Where are we going?" she asked.

He didn't stop, but pointed up as he rounded the next switchback.

"Right there," he said. "Just one more minute and we'll be there. I promise."

El looked up to where Mike was pointing. Just above them, one more switchback up the way, was the vague, darkened outline of a triangular roof. It looked like a cabin, but the rest of was obscured by the hill they had yet to summit.

As they reached the top of the hill, the structure came into view. It was a decent sized, modern looking cabin with a vast, triangular roof. Mike approached the cabin and ascended the wooden steps to the porch. He bent down to tilt a potted plant off the surface of the porch, grabbing a glinting silver object that El could only guess was a key. She was glad he had been in front of her. She was so wiped she

probably would have just used her powers to unlock the door without even thinking about it. Her bones were lead.

Mike opened the door and walked inside, waiting for El to come in before closing and locking it. El walked forward on the polished wooden floor, staring in awe at the expansive, triangular window that composed nearly the entire wall opposite the front door. With both the moon and stars out now, wide swaths of pale silvery light danced across the spotless surface, filtering into the room and illuminating the dust particles floating gently through the unoccupied space.

Whoever's place this was, they were clearly well off. A large, lavish blue and white patterned rug lay in the living area in the middle of the space. A leather sectional couch was positioned around the rug in front of the largest TV El had ever seen. There was an elaborately carved mahogany coffee table in front of the couch. Another table, just as expensive looking, tucked away against one of the side walls featured five crystal bottles filled with different drinks, and a set of crystal drinking glasses. The kitchen, which was just off to the side and open to the living area, housed very new looking appliances.

There was a wooden ladder to a loft area where the beds had to be. And there was a door to another room that was likely the bathroom.

El slipped her shoes off and crossed the room to look out the window. Her mouth opened in silent wonder as the sight beyond the glass came into view.

They were high up. Higher than she'd realized. The cabin sat on the edge of a cliff overlooking a deep valley, a crystalline lake shimmering like a dimensional portal right in the middle. Trees edged the perimeter of the lake filling the space that wasn't rock or water. El didn't know the names of different kinds of trees, but she was pretty sure these were Christmas trees. It was almost a shame it wasn't snowing, even though she shivered again at the thought.

She felt a warm hand land delicately on her bicep. She turned around and looked up at Mike, his features pale just like they were the night she'd spent with him at his house.

"El," he said, more a breath than a name.

She searched his eyes, so dark and focused. "Yes?" she said.

"Are you okay?" he asked. He had kept a hand on her arm, as if he was ready to catch her should she suddenly collapse. His free hand traveled toward her face, but seemed to decide against its course of action at the last second, dropping.

Shame, El thought.

"I'm okay," she replied.

Mike let his other hand slip off her arm, falling to his side. "I saw your nose bleeding at the party. Did you get hit? Are you sure you're not hurt?"

El cast her gaze down at the floor, the polished surfboard shining in the soft light.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just bumped into something. It doesn't hurt." It was a weak lie but the party had been chaos, and she knew he wouldn't question her.

She glanced back up at him. He was still looking at her, searchingly, not saying anything.

"Mike," she began, "really, I'm *umph*—"

And then he was hugging her, arms wrapped around her with maybe a little more force than he had intended. He loosened just a little, probably to make sure he wasn't suffocating her. She hugged him back, squeezing firmly. One of his hands found its way up to her now unruly mane of hair. He combed his fingers into the bottom of her hairline on her neck, massaging her scalp. She rested her head against his chest and resisted the urge to moan at the buzz of pleasure that filled her. Her eyes fluttered closed and she let him warm her up.

"I'm so sorry, El," he said. "I'm so sorry."

Her eyebrows drew together but she couldn't bring herself to open

her eyes as he continued to massage her. Her breaths came slower and deeper.

"Sorry?" she said. "Why are you sorry? You helped me." Her voiced was slightly muffled since she was still pulled tight against his chest.

"I'm just . . . I can't believe this is happening. You're the last person who deserves this. Do you understand what happened?"

They pulled apart, hanging onto each other's arms like they were afraid the other would evaporate if they let go.

"No," she said, shaking her head forlornly. "I don't understand."

There was a pause. Mike grabbed her hand and led her to the couch. They sat down, sinking into the luxurious leather and letting out matching sighs of relief.

"I should say sorry to you," she mumbled, "not you to me."

Mike shook his head. "Why's that?" he asked.

"You didn't have to do this; you didn't have to hide me. Now you're in danger too." Her voice wavered. "And you could get hurt. And it would be all my fault. And you broke your guitar fighting for me, and now you and your band are probably in trouble, and—"

"El, no, stop stop stop," he said, waving his hands. She looked at him through tears that threatened to fall. Her lip trembled slightly.

Mike shook his head at her, lips pulled into a melancholy smile. He slid closer to her on the couch, placing a hand on her back and rubbing slowly up and down. Her head, like a magnet, came to rest on his shoulder, pressing into the hollow of his neck.

"Of course you're worried about *me*," he said. "The whole town thinks you killed two people and you're worried I'm gonna get hurt." A chuckle slipped out from between his lips. "And your worried about my damn guitar," he said, actually laughing now.

She sat up, looking at him indignantly. "Well, it broke in half!" she said, trying to defend her concerns as legitimate. "How expensive was

it? If I get out of this, I'm going to pay you back."

Mike lost it at that, rolling onto his side and holding his belly. El wiped an errant tear off her cheek. She didn't know what was so funny but she couldn't help the little smile that played onto her lips, watching Mike trying and failing to quell his laughter.

"I still don't get what's funny," El said, almost laughing herself at his little outburst.

"You . . ." Mike said, still catching his breath. He sat up. "You are most definitely *not* going to buy me another guitar."

El frowned. "Why not?" she asked. "I can get a job. Once I'm not a murderer."

Mike stared at her, agape. There was something in his eyes as he looked at her that she really liked. She was sure she hadn't seen it there before.

"You're ridiculous," he said. El was clearly affronted by that. "You're ridiculous and selfless and completely amazing."

"Oh," she said, blushing and looking down.

El sat on the couch, freshly showered and dressed in clean clothes, trying to take her mind off everything by watching *The Golden Girls* as she waited for Mike to come out of the shower. It was hard to focus.

After a few minutes, Mike emerged from the bathroom. El felt the humid gust of warmth that swept by her as Mike opened the door. He walked back into the main room wearing sweatpants and a baggy Velvet Underground t-shirt. His hair was damp, much less fluffed than normal. He opened a closet near the front door and rummaged around for a moment, coming out with a backpack. He stuffed his dirty clothes into the bag, then collected El's from where she'd left her's and threw them in as well.

It was weird being in this kind of a setting with him, wearing pajamas after they'd taken showers, sitting around, alone in a house

together, watching TV. It was all so — domestic. Usually you didn't see this side of a person until you'd gotten to know them pretty well, but they'd kind of been forced into this situation. She wasn't complaining. It was just strange to watch him handling things like her dirty laundry, and *my dirty underwear were in there too, that's kind of embarrassing*. She flushed at the thought even though she knew she was being silly.

"Mike," she said as he came back to the couch and plopped down tiredly. "Whose house are we in?" Oddly, she hadn't had the presence of mind to ask until now, or she hadn't really cared. She'd just been glad to be safe and off her feet.

"This is my manager's house," he said. "Well, the band's manager. He lives in Chicago, but when he started working with us and we got the record deal, he decided to get a place he could stay at while he's here."

"Oh," she said. "Who's clothes am I wearing?" Mike had given her some comfortable, white lace patterned pajama shorts that fell about a third of the way down her thighs and a worn in sky colored cotton t-shirt with roses embroidered on the pocket. She was exceedingly comfortable, and for going to sleep, she thought the clothes looked pretty cute. She was already devising a tentative plan to steal the clothes without Mike noticing.

Mike bit down on his lip. He looked nervous.

"Um," he said. "I was kind of hoping you wouldn't ask that."

El frowned. Why wouldn't he want her to ask that?

Mike got up and walked around to the table with all the drinks. He poured himself a good amount of something clear.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked. "Everything I had going for me at the party wore off after we ran for God knows how long."

"A drink of what?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm having gin."

"Gin?"

"Uh, yeah, like . . . liquor? You know, like whiskey, tequila, rum, vodka . . . gin?"

"Oh," El said. She knew liquor. She'd had whiskey. "Please," she decided.

Mike poured her a glass like his and handed it to her over the couch, walking back around to take his seat.

As he sat, she took an experimental sip of her drink. Then, more confidently, a gulp. She could feel the warmth spreading through her body as it trailed its way down. It tasted floral. She liked it.

"Mm," she said. "Much better than whiskey."

"I think so too," Mike said.

She set her glass down on the table for a moment. She didn't want to harass Mike, but he couldn't just say something like that and then expect her to drop it.

"Mike," she said again, trying to tear his attention away from the rim of glass, which was apparently extremely interesting. "Why would you not want me to ask that?"

He glanced at her, holding her gaze for a moment, then looked back down. He took another gulp, sighed, and sat his glass down on the wooden table with a thud.

"The clothes . . ." he said. "They're my ex-girlfriend, Audrey's."

El's heart did some kind of weird twinging thing that she decidedly did not like. She looked down at the clothes she was wearing and somehow felt a little less clean.

"Oh," she said, her voice small. She looked away from him.

"Yeah," he said, sounding pained. "Donald, my manager — he lets me stay here if I want whenever he's back in Chicago. I told Audrey I was gonna be staying out here one night, and she just — she wanted to

come with me."

El was quiet.

"El, I'm sorry," he said. "Honestly, I only dated Audrey for like a month, and it was never anything special. We weren't even — I mean, we never even . . ." he trailed off, obviously not knowing how to finish his thought.

"You don't have to be sorry," she said, though even to her, he voice sounded all tight and wrong. "You didn't do anything wrong." She was very annoyed and upset and she didn't even really know why.

Mike sat up, shaking his head.

"It's just . . . I don't know. It was either give you those or give you some of the clothes I'd left over here that would be way too big. Maybe it was a mistake. I didn't want to bring this up, I mean—"

"Audrey Blake?" El asked, cutting off his rambling.

He slumped back down.

"Yeah," he said. "Audrey Blake."

El looked back down at the clothes. Audrey Blake was the most beautiful girl in the whole grade — probably the whole school — and everybody knew it. No wonder El had liked the clothes so much. Audrey had more of a sense for style in her little toe than El probably had in her whole body. And more money, besides.

El remembered when Mike had started dating Audrey. It had been all anyone talked about for a week. It had hurt so much, and she'd hated it it, and then she'd gotten mad at herself for being so upset because she'd never even talked to Mike before.

Mike took another gulp of his drink, finishing it in what was probably way too short a time.

"Audrey is beautiful," El said. She could tell she still sounded annoyed. "Why did you break up with her?"

"She's not bad, sure," he said. "But it just wasn't working. She just . . . I don't know. She seemed fake to me. Like someone slapped a nice paint job on an old, broken down car. Our conversations were shallow, and we didn't really connect — unlike with — unlike with someone else I know."

He stopped and took a deep breath, letting it out through his mouth in a bug puff.

"Oh," she said, finally looking at him again. It made her glad to know that the relationship hadn't really amounted to anything.

"But, yeah," he said. "I'm sorry about the clothes. I could get you some other ones if you want. They'll just be big."

"It's okay," El said. "They're comfortable."

Mike drummed his fingers on the couch for a moment, his brows drawn together like he was trying to decide something. He looked at her and stood from his spot on the couch, moving to sit on the coffee table directly across from her. She was sitting criss cross and he was leaning forward. Their faces were only about a foot apart now.

"El?" he said.

"Yes?" she replied, looking into his eyes.

"You have to know that you look a hundred times more beautiful in those clothes than she did," he said, not looking away. "A thousand times," he amended.

El's entire body flushed at that, feeling so warm she was worried she might start sweating. She looked away bashfully.

"You drank too much," she said.

"No," he said, grabbing her hand. "El, I mean it. Even if I were drunk, I'd still mean it."

She looked back up to him and smiled hesitantly.

"I get dumber when I'm drunk," he said. "Not dishonest."

She laughed then.

"Fine," she said, squeezing his hand.

They had agreed that neither of them were much in the mood for sleep after what they'd seen. It was all a little too fresh. So, they had stayed up drinking some beers Mike found in the fridge, watching a few more episodes of *The Golden Girls*. Eventually, they found themselves next to each other on the couch, sharing a blanket, El leaning on Mike. They both struggled to keep their eyes open, the alcohol and the events of their day catching up with them.

When Mike noticed El's breathing slow down and even out, her eyes completely shut, he grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. He turned to look at her but couldn't really get a view of her face with her head on his shoulder. The blanket had slipped off of her and pooled around her feet. Mike's eyes landed on a strip of exposed skin on her waist where her shirt had ridden up. His gaze traveled down to her thighs in those white shorts, making her skin look so tan and smooth, and . . .

Mike rubbed at his eyes and shook his head a bit. He couldn't help but feel like he really shouldn't be thinking about her in that way when they hadn't established where they stood. But he'd be damned if she didn't look a thousand times better — no, a million times better than Audrey in those shorts. There wasn't even a comparison. No one else came close to El. No one else was like El.

He listened to her breathing as he watched her chest rise and fall and thought about how weird it was that he was already so attached to her and did not care in the slightest.

He really didn't want to wake her. But they would sleep better up in the loft, and he didn't want her to have a crick in her neck.

Gently as he could, he brushed her hair away from her face.

"El," he said, softly. She groaned in her sleep, mumbling something indistinct. Mike placed a hand on her thigh and smoothed his thumb over her skin. "El, c'mon," he said. "Let's go to bed."

She stirred, lifting her head from his shoulder and reaching up, arching her back and stretching like a cat. Mike tried to avert his gaze as her shirt rode up further to expose her stomach, but it was harder than he'd thought it would be.

She looked at him, eyes still half lidded.

"So tired," she muttered.

"I know," Mike said, chuckling. "Let's get you up to bed."

He stood and helped her up, leading her over to the ladder. *I wonder if this will be a problem*, he thought to himself. She'd had about as much as he had, and while he wasn't drunk, there was a pleasant movement to the room.

"Okay, you first," he said. "I've got you if you fall."

El climbed up the ladder looking a little sluggish, a little more off-balance than usual, but not too terrible. Mike followed her up to find her already sprawled out face down in the huge king size bed.

The triangular window that dominated the entire wall on this side of the house continued all the way through the loft and met at the point of the roof. The head of the bed was at the window, and as Mike laid down he could feel the chill coming off of the glass. He looked out at the valley and the lake below them and couldn't deny it was still the best view he'd ever had from bed. *Actually*, he thought, and glanced over at El. He changed his mind, then.

Just then, she flipped over onto her back, eyes wide open, if a little unfocused.

"Mike," she said to the vaulted ceiling.

"Uh-huh?"

"What is sex?"

Mike's eyes went wide and he sat up straight, fast, nearly giving himself whiplash.

"What?" he said in a voice that sounded an octave too high.

"It's just," El began, scooting closer to him. "Hopper won't tell me and he freaks out when I bring it up. Max gets weird when I talk about it. Will said I could probably figure it out if I just watched movies and TV long enough, but I still don't get it."

Mike suddenly remembered everything Max had told him about El's background — about her rough childhood and her late start with language and education. If you were paying attention, you could definitely notice something off about the way she spoke. You'd probably also realize that she only used common words and that she sometimes messed her grammar up or misused a word. But he'd gotten so used to it — so used to her and the way she was that he'd forgotten about it.

"Oh," he said slowly, trying to keep calm and think of a way around this landmine.

She scooted even closer until she was touching him, snuggling up against his leg as he remained sitting upright in the bed.

"I — I get embarrassed when I don't know things other kids know," she said so sadly that Mike had to refrain from picking her up and hugging her.

He was actually battling a lot of conflicting emotions: he wanted to scoot away from her because she was talking about *that* while curled up against his leg. He wanted to wrap his arms around and tell her that it was okay that she didn't know everything kids her age knew. He also wanted to go to sleep and deal with all of this when he was sober and rested. It didn't seem like an option, though.

"And it's worse," she continued, "because usually my friends or Hopper will help me when I don't know something. But when I ask about this, they act like I asked something bad, and they don't tell me." She started to sniffle and Mike's heart just about broke. "And I just feel . . . stupid," she said.

He imagined some things he would do to whoever ruined this girl's childhood.

He couldn't take it anymore. He laid back and propped himself up against the pillows by the window.

"Hey," he said. "Come here."

El crawled to him and stopped hesitantly like she didn't know what he wanted her to do. He leaned up for a moment to rest his hands on her shoulders and guide her down next to him so that she was curled against his side, her head on his chest. He wrapped an arm firmly around her and pulled her in closer, using his free hand to pull the comforter out from under them, laying it over top of them. Once they were under the covers, El threw a leg over Mike.

Mike held her tight and stroked her hair for a minute, just relishing in how good she felt in his arms.

"El," he said into her hair. "You are one of the smartest people I've ever met."

She sniffled and shook her head against him.

"I'm not just saying that," he said. "I'm serious. Max told me a little bit about your past. How long have you really been speaking English?" he asked.

El sighed. "I don't know," she said. "Three or four years?"

Mike laughed. "A few years!" he said. "El, you're incredible. You're a genius."

"You don't have to do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"Say things just to make me feel better."

"I'm saying these things because they're true and because you're lying to yourself if you think you're stupid," he retorted.

El was quiet for a minute after that. She laid there as Mike continued to run his fingers through her hair.

"You still never told me," she said.

"Told you what?" he asked.

"What sex is."

His hand stopped moving through her hair immediately and he froze up. But he remembered what she'd said earlier about everyone's reaction when she asked this. He didn't want to make her feel bad. She didn't know what she was asking. So after a moment, he continued to stroke her hair and made himself relax, sinking back into the bed.

He could be mature about this. He totally could.

"Sex," he said slowly, trying to make the word sound harmless as it rolled off his tongue. "Sex is . . . do you know how women get pregnant sometimes? Like, they get a really big, round belly and then they have a baby?"

"Yes," El said.

"Okay," he said. "So sex is what can get a woman pregnant. But it takes both a man and a woman. A woman can't get pregnant on her own. So if a couple wants to have a baby, they have sex."

Mike sighed, wondering how he'd even made it this far. He attributed it to the alcohol.

"I guess that's not all, though," he went on. "Most of the time, people aren't really trying to have babies. So when they do have sex, they're doing it because it feels good. For most people, it's something that you only do with someone you really, really like — hopefully someone you love."

When she was quiet, he continued, not knowing how else to fill the silence.

"Some people will even wait until they're married to do it because they only want to with one person: the one that they're in love with. I guess the reason why everyone acts so weird when you ask about it is because it's a really private, intimate thing. You only share it with the

person you do it with, and that's what makes it special."

"So . . ." she said, finally speaking up. "How do you actually do sex? Or — have sex, I mean. Is it like kissing?"

"Um," Mike said, trying as hard as he could not to get awkward again. He knew this wasn't her fault. "Sometimes kissing is involved. I guess, probably most of the time actually. But no, that's not all it is. There's a lot more to it, and it's way more intense."

He stopped for a second. "El . . . this is totally not your fault, but I don't think I should be the one to explain to you how it actually works. It's just . . . well, you'll find out when you learn. Which you will, I promise. There's no way to avoid it forever."

"Okay," she said, seeming satisfied by his answer for the moment.

They laid there for a while, Mike allowing himself to calm down. *It's over.*

"Mike?" she asked. "Have you had sex?"

It would seem she still didn't understand the part about it being a private thing. His patience remained, though.

"Uh . . . no," he said. "No, I haven't."

"Why?" she asked.

Mike thought about it. Why hadn't he? He'd had girlfriends before. One of them had even pushed him to have sex quite a few times, but he'd always refused.

"I guess I just hadn't found anyone that I'd really want to do it with," he said. Then he cursed himself mentally. *Haven't.* He'd meant to say *haven't.*

Thankfully, El didn't seem to pick up on it.

"Have I had sex?" she asked.

Mike blanched. *I hope not,* he thought.

"I think you'd know if you had, El."

"Hm," she replied thoughtfully. She readjusted herself, bringing her leg further over him and wrapping an arm around his torso.

"Mike?" she said again.

He tried to prepare himself, eyes wrenched shut in anticipation.

"Thank you," was all she said.

Mike smiled, features relaxing. The buzz may have had a part to play, but he tilted his head forward and planted a kiss firmly onto the top of her head.

"Anytime, El," he said.

They laid there, just feeling each other's warmth and breath for a while. When Mike actually stopped to think about who was laying splayed out on top of him, his mind began to spin. He'd never had feelings like this before. This girl was perfection.

Something was nagging at him from the back of his mind, though, as much as he wanted just to drift away into this blissful moment.

"El," he said. "You awake?"

"Yes," she yawned.

"We never really talked about what happened at the party," he said. "Did you . . . did you see what happened?"

El didn't speak up for a minute.

"No," she said eventually. "I didn't see. I only heard them shout it was me. Then they came for me."

"Well," Mike began, not really knowing how to describe to her what he saw without seeming crazy. "I heard all the shouting and the screaming. And then I saw *you* come out of the back hallway. You had a bloody kitchen knife in your hand, and there was blood spattered all over your body. The thing is . . . when I looked back

right in front of me, you were still there. I don't know who that other girl was, but somehow, she looked just like you."

El seemed to contemplate this.

"Remember the day we were eating on the roof?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he said. "Of course."

"When Max came to me, I said I was sorry I wasn't at Will's the night before. She said I *was* at Will's. I thought she was just trying to . . . cover for me? Is that how you say it?"

"Yeah," Mike replied absentmindedly. "Cover for you, that's how you say it."

He thought for a little while longer.

"So you think this person that looks like you is going around and acting like they really are you?" he asked her.

El let out a deep, tired sigh. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe."

"We'll have to see what else we can find out tomorrow," he said. "We can use this place as a base for a while if we need to."

El nodded against him faintly, clearly out of energy.

He folded her closer into his body, readjusting his head on his pillow to get more comfortable.

"Night El," he said.

She looked up at him. Then, she leaned and placed a slow, delicate kiss on his cheek. She nestled back down into his chest.

"Night Mike," she said.

For much of this chapter, I just had one song from the ST2 soundtrack stuck in my head. That song would be "Outside the Realm" by Big Giant Circles, and I just felt like it fit a lot of

moments in this chapter. It's super ethereal and moody if you've never given it a listen outside of the show. Really cool.

I wanted to recommend a few fics if you're waiting on mine or any other ones to update. You may have already read them, but I wanted to drop some of my current favorites:

"Full Circle" by L Borealis (C'mon. If you haven't read this one, just do yourself a favor)

"The Jump" by L Borealis (Unfinished, but I'm loving it so far)

"Brilliant Lies" by starsandwristrockets (Unfinished. This is way different. It's from Holly's perspective when Mike and El are grown up and have a kid. Holly is digging up things from the past and starting to discover that her brother and sister-in-law have a much more interesting story than she would've guessed. I LOVE seeing Mike and El from this perspective and I'm eagerly waiting for more.)

GIVE ME GOOD ST FIC RECS! I'm really bad at sifting through the garbage sometimes and I feel like I'm missing out on some hidden gems.

10. Chapter 10

The only thing contrasting the endless black of the void was the familiarly solid floor of water. El looked down at her reflection in the wet, black mirror. A ripple traveled outward from the center of her footfall, distorting her image, making it shimmer like a mirage.

It always took her brain a minute to catch up with her whenever she found herself here. She felt the dread pooling in her stomach like poison. This wasn't a dream. It never was with this place. It was always far too real.

Stepping into the void of her own free will was one thing. She would do it if it was necessary — like the time she'd needed to look for Will. She'd even gotten comfortable enough with it recently to mess around a bit, though spying on the boys had been Max's idea and they'd agreed not to do it again.

Being thrust into the void at random, though — it usually didn't have anything good to show her.

El turned in a circle, waiting for something to materialize in the infinite span of nothingness.

"Hello?" She cried out tentatively. She began walking forward, not knowing what else to do.

That's when she heard it behind her: an obscene, wet, smacking noise. She whipped around.

Crouched, with her back to El, was a girl engrossed by something she seemed to be devouring without any regard for common table manners.

Drawn to the girl by an inexplicable magnetism, El crept forward carefully, holding her breath.

The crouched figure had wavy brown hair that fell to her shoulders. She was slim and slight. El could see the back of a worn out, overused pair of Vans hi-tops, a pair of faded jeans, a well-loved

denim jacket—

Wait.

I know that outfit.

El's heart beat heavy, pounding upon the prison of her ribcage, begging to be free. She could feel her pulse twinging in her neck.

Her bare foot fell a little harder than she'd intended, slapping against the watery surface. She froze.

The crouched girl turned slowly, still low, pivoting to face her.

El would have screamed if she could have comprehended what she was looking at. She looked into the girl's big, round, amber eyes; eyes El had looked into countless times, but only through the barrier of a mirror or the gloss of a developed picture. There was an emptiness there she had never seen before. Not a lack of intelligence.

A soullessness. A pit, devoid of humanity.

These eyes, if one ventured to inspect them too closely, revealed a tunnel-like quality akin to the eternal fall into Tartarus. Just looking into them threatened to sweep El's feet out from under her, and she could feel her stomach jump as if she'd been plunged into the cold, menacing tunnel herself.

El watched herself rise slowly. The void El was not an image she'd be able to scrub from her mind for decades, and even then, having done her utmost to tear the visage from her memory, detail by detail, a remnant — like a shining masque at a ball — would appear to her in dreams all the days of her earthly life.

Blood covered much of the imitation El's lower face. There was fresh blood, a glistening crimson that dripped from her mouth, slithering down her chin. There was older, darker blood, dried and caked around her mouth, splattered droplets dried further up on her cheeks.

After a moment of wordless staring, void El smiled — a close-lipped smirk. Then, a wide, toothy grin that lacked the conveyance of any real emotion. It looked instinctual, detached. It looked the way a Lion

might bare its teeth at a rival for encroaching upon its food.

There was blood in her teeth, too, lining the cracks, smeared across the pearly faces.

El could only stare, wishing she could look away. Her feet began to backtrack without her mind having to give the order. That's when she caught sight of the object in the void El's grip, dangling from her hand.

El's breath caught, and she felt the bile threatening to work its way through her body, inching up her esophagus.

It wasn't . . . *human*, right? There had to be an animal with a leg like . . .

No. Even with the chunks already bitten out of the pale, lifeless flesh, even though it was completely separated from a body, femur jaggedly poking out of the end of the thigh — El knew it was human. A full, human leg.

And that's when El, trying desperately to back away further, tripped on her own feet, falling.

Void El dropped the leg, a wet slap echoing its way through the otherworldly space.

She stalked forward with an eery, mechanistic efficiency.

El saw the knife she produced, seemingly from thin air. A kitchen knife.

She tried in vain to shove the void El with her powers — to throw her back, to crush her into the ground, to snap her neck — she would take what she could get. She would take anything right now.

Nothing happened. All El felt was a faint, dead buzz in the front of her skull, like a broken doorbell.

"Thank you for your body, Eleven," void El said, coming to stand over her. She raised the knife.

"I'm enjoying my stay."

The knife came down, hard.

El screamed.

Mike woke slowly, not entirely ready to be awake. The sun shone down on his eyelids, an unwelcome alarm clock. He refused to acknowledge it.

Warmth enveloped his body, and El's body felt so indescribably soft where it met his—

Oh.

He opened his eyes, more eager now to take in his surroundings.

They must've forgotten to shut the curtains all the way. The bed practically glowed, sun rays beaming through the window so thick they seemed an actual substance that hovered over the mattress.

Squinting, Mike reached an arm back as far as he could without disturbing El, just grasping the corner of a curtain and managing to pull it further closed.

He turned his head to look at El, whose head had made its way off his chest and onto a pillow at some point during the night. She was still so close that he could feel her breaths on his cheek. Her legs remained wrapped up in his, her torso pressed up against him as he laid on his back.

Looking at her, his face was only an inch or two away. He took the opportunity to examine her closer. Though he found everything about her attractive, his gaze landed on her lips. Had they always been so full? They were just slightly parted as she slept, a tiny puff of breath escaping from her mouth each time she exhaled, sure and slow. For reasons he couldn't even explain, Mike found it adorable.

He wanted to kiss her. *Okay, slow down.* She was so close. He could just scoot over about an inch and their lips would brush, and he'd finally know if they were as soft as they looked, if they were—

I have to stop.

The last thing El needed right now was for him to dump his embarrassingly huge crush on her while she was probably stressed out of her mind, hiding out and wanted for murder.

A part of his brain that longed for her, no matter how he attained her, told him that he was being boyish and oblivious — that she obviously had to have a thing for him, too, if her closeness was any indication.

But no. Assuming things like that was a complete douche thing to do, and El was going through a lot, besides. Maybe she just needed comfort. It probably also had something to do with her troubled past and her . . . well, *unique* social situation.

Then why had she acted so angry when I brought Audrey up? he wondered. It was almost like she was . . . jealous.

He needed to stop reading so far into things. He was acting like a lovesick middle schooler.

He couldn't bring himself to stop looking at her, though. Her hair was mussed and a little crazy from sleep. It was absolutely gorgeous. It framed her feminine jawline like a mane. He remembered running his hands through it just last night. It was one of the softest things he'd ever felt. He could almost feel his fingers itching, pleading to touch it again.

While Mike contemplated whether or not it would be weird for him to cave in to his urge, El's blank, peaceful expression pinched just slightly. Her eyebrows drew a little closer together, her nose subtly scrunched.

A vaguely unhappy noise came from her throat, low and sleepy at first. Mike watched as her face twitched. She made a noise like a whimper.

He wondered if he should wake her. She was probably having a nightmare. He couldn't blame her after what had happened yesterday.

"No," she mumbled. "No, no."

Her breathing became rapid, sharp.

That settled it. Mike resolved to wake her up. Just as he was reaching out to grasp her shoulder, she gasped, her body jolting. Her cries became much louder, more frantic, more desperate.

"No!" she yelled. "Stop! No!"

Mike sat up, trying to wake her again, but just as he was about to shake her, the lamps on either side of the bed began flickering wildly.

Confused, Mike could only sit upright, looking around in vain for the cause of this haunted light show going on.

Then, something else happened. As El's screams rose in pitch, she began writhing around in the bed like she was in pain.

The lamps sitting on night stands on either side of the bed rose up into the air, floating there, a couple of feet above where physics demanded they be.

Mike had no idea if he was dreaming or if he'd died and gone to some strange alternate reality, but he was tired of sitting and doing nothing. He couldn't stand the sound of El in pain.

Shock wearing off, he leaned over El and grasped both of her shoulders.

"El," he said, giving her a firm, but gentle shake. "El, wake up! It's a nightmare. You're dreaming, I promise!"

Her screams subsided almost completely and her face contorted, confused. She still squirmed a bit in his grasp, like she was trying to get free. A pained kind of moan came from her throat.

"El, it's okay," he said more gently, now that she'd quieted down. "It's a dream. You can wake up now."

Even as Mike tried to bring her back to reality, he glanced worriedly around him at the fluctuating fixtures, the room like an artificial

lightning storm around him. The lamps still hovered ominously, like the heralds of some kind of household electronic doomsday.

El groaned again, a little calmer, but still stuck in whatever hellish vision she was seeing. Desperate to wake her, Mike sat up at the head of the bed, resting his back against the window. Grabbing her under the armpits, he dragged her into his lap, cradling her. He stroked her hair and spoke soothingly into her ear. An errant, unhelpful part of him realized that his wish to touch her hair again had been granted — just not in the way he'd hoped.

El calmed considerably, going limp as he held her, arms wrapped around her.

"Mike," she sighed.

The lights stopped flickering, shutting off. The porcelain lamps fell back down to the hard, wooden nightstands and shattered, shards of gleaming blue pottery crashing to the floor.

As suddenly as it had all started, it was over.

El's eyes fluttered open. Her breathing evened out.

She looked around her for a second, then looked down, seeing one of Mike's arms around her midsection. She glanced up to him, the back of her head on his shoulder. He was sure he still looked shellshocked and probably just a little crazy.

They stayed like this for a moment, El still orienting herself and Mike completely unsure of what to say or do.

"You okay?" he asked, deciding this was a good place to start.

She merely nodded, sitting up, forcing him to let go of her. She removed herself from his lap, sitting next to him on the bed. She faced him, crossing her legs, taking a deep breath. A silence encased the room, bordering on tense.

She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

"Sorry," she said, hesitantly, voice still scratchy. "Nightmare." She

looked embarrassed.

Mike knew he must looking at her like she had two heads, but he couldn't help it. He was still piecing together everything that had just happened, his mind working furiously to put the puzzle pieces together.

It was then that El seemed to notice the lamps — or the lack thereof.

"Um . . . Mike?" she asked, clenching the bottom of her shirt. "What happened to the lamps?"

Mike sat for a moment, eyes still wide, brain in overdrive.

"Mike?" she prodded, clearly nervous.

Even though he was prone to wild speculation and took stock in more than a few conspiracy theories, this took the cake as the most unbelievable thing he believed in. This took the cake, devoured it, spewed it back out, and took it again.

"Here's the thing," Mike began slowly, bringing his hands together in a prayer-like gesture in front of his chest. "I'm pretty sure that *you*," he pointed at her, "happened to the lamps."

El froze. Her eyes were wide, almost scared, too alert for having just woken up.

Mike had been feeling absolutely mental for what he was about to say to her, but her reaction gave him the confidence he needed.

"What — what do you mean?" she asked.

Just to try to get out of actually saying it all, he gave her a chance. "Is there anything you want to tell me?" he asked.

El couldn't look at him. "I don't think so . . ." she said miserably.

Mike sighed.

"Alright," he said. "Look. I could be stuck in a really freaky dream. Maybe there was something weird in my drink last night. Maybe I hit

my head really hard while I was sleeping. I honestly don't know. But I feel like I can't ignore all of this, so . . . bear with me?"

El nodded at him, not doing a great job of hiding a grimace.

"Okay," Mike said. "So, first thing out of the ordinary: that time you shoved Jacob Striver to the ground with one hand. The guy's like over two hundred pounds. No offense, El, you're adorable, but you're not exactly WWE material. It didn't make any sense, but I let it go."

He looked at her, waiting for a reaction.

El just shrugged.

"Lucky shove?" she said weakly. "He was off-balance?"

"Sure," Mike said. "Maybe. But I just remembered something else. I hadn't thought about it since the party cause there's just been too much going on. But Greg? That guy from the wrestling team that knocked me over? He was about to pound my face in, but at the last second, he got ripped away from me. It was like a damn gorilla got a hold of him. When I looked up, the guy was embedded halfway in the drywall."

He paused, looking at her again. She couldn't stop fidgeting with things. Her clothes, the comforter, her hair. She rarely glanced up to meet his eyes.

"And there was no one around me that could have helped," he went on, sensing she wouldn't say anything. "No one that could have done it. So I just chalked it up to an act of God until I stood and you were right behind me."

She looked at him now, something else in her eyes. He knew the look. She'd worn it the night of the party, in the exact moment he'd just recounted. It said, unequivocally, *do not fuck with me*.

"Your nose was bleeding then," he said softly, almost tenderly. He moved toward her despite the hardness in her eyes. Somehow, by some instinct, he knew she wouldn't hurt him.

He sat down directly in front of her, mirroring her, so close their

knees were touching. He leaned forward slowly and reached toward her face. She didn't move.

Mike swiped his thumb across the skin right above El's upper lip, wiping away the blood that had dripped from her nose. El stared at it in shock.

"Just like it's bleeding now," he said.

He took her hand in his clean one.

"The lamps were floating, El," he said. "You were screaming and rolling around, and the lights were going all haywire. As soon as I got you to calm down, the lights stopped. The lamps came back down. And you woke up."

She just hung her head, shaking it back and forth.

"So are you sure there's not anything you want to tell me?" he asked.

He gave her a minute. He waited, patiently, stroking his thumb against the skin of her hand.

She didn't offer anything.

He sighed.

"You're different," he said. "Aren't you? I mean, obviously you're still human, that's not what I mean . . ."

He paused, looking for the right words. Why didn't they teach you how to handle this kind of thing in school? *The girl you're into is wanted for murder and also happens to have superpowers: want to know what to say to her? Turn to page fifty-six.*

"I just mean — you're special," he settled on. "You have some kind of . . . powers. I mean, this could totally still be some kind of wild dream, like, this is insanely trippy. But I think I'm right. Aren't I?"

El held onto his hand for a moment longer. Then, she let go and slid to the edge of the bed. She stood, avoiding the broken pieces of the lamp.

"No," she said to him, simple and monotone. "I don't have powers. I have to pee."

"Oh — Okay?" he said, watching her make her way to the ladder and begin her descent to the first floor.

He followed her, bewildered, determined to set all of this straight. Either he was having some sort of a manic episode and needed help, or she was hiding something.

When Mike's feet hit the floor, she was already shutting herself in the bathroom.

He waited for her to come out for a while, pacing.

Then, he paced some more.

His mind ran through all of the possible reasons he knew of that the lamps could have been floating. After going through a pretty straightforward process of elimination, he landed back at his original answer: El.

Speaking of, how long had she been in the bathroom? It had been a long time, he was sure of it.

"El?" he called out. "You okay in there?"

No response.

"El?"

He pursed his lips. He was becoming impatient. Plus, she could actually be hurt in there. She'd just had some kind of telekinetic dream. He didn't know what the side effects were. It was uncharted territory.

"El, seriously!" he said. "If you don't say something, I'm gonna come in there and check on you!"

"I'm fine, Mike!" she said. "Just . . . I just need a minute alone. Okay?"

He had thought that's what it was. He approached the door, leaning

his head against it.

"El, c'mon," he said. "This is kind of unfair. Can you at least admit it to me so I don't think I'm crazy?"

"I don't have powers!"

"Then what was all *that* about?!" he said, gesturing wildly but realizing she couldn't see him.

"What was all what about?" she asked, clearly trying to sound innocent.

Mike had begun pacing again. He halted.

"Really?" he asked. "That's how you're going to play this?"

"That's how I'm going to play what?" she answered.

"El!"

"Mike!"

"WHEELER!" a voice yelled from outside the cabin.

Mike froze. El flung the bathroom door open.

"Who was that?" she said in a low voice.

"WHEELER, YOU GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE RIGHT NOW IF YOU'RE IN THERE!"

Mike motioned for her to stay low, making his way to the window by the front door.

"That voice sounds familiar . . ." Mike said apprehensively. It was hard to tell if he knew who it was or not. People tended to sound different yelling through walls.

Mike crouched at the window. El followed him, crouched behind him, hand on his shoulder to steady herself. The blinds were closed. Mike slid one partially open and gazed out at the intruder.

"Shit," said Mike. "Does this idiot ever stop?"

"Who is it?" El asked.

"It's Troy," he groaned. "It's definitely Troy. And a few of his good-for-nothing, peabrain, no-name goons, too."

"COME ON OUT, FROGFACE! OR WE'RE COMING IN!"

"Frogface?" El whispered.

"What?" Mike said. "You don't see the resemblance?"

"No," she said, appalled. "I think you're really pretty."

"Pretty," Mike mused. "Interesting word choice, but I'll take it."

He turned to face her. "Alright, here's the plan," he said. "I don't know if you noticed when we came in last night, but there's a garage below us. Donald keeps an old truck in there to take his canoe to the lake and back. We can just get down there, start it up, open the garage and speed right past them."

"He won't mind?" El asked.

"Uhhh, no," Mike said. "He'll be okay with it."

"You're sure?"

"Well, I mean. I don't really plan on telling him," he said. "Unless I crash it. That's not the point, though. It's our only way out of here."

El raised her eyebrows. She shrugged a vague assent, though, and that was enough for Mike.

"Unless," he said, "You know, you just wanna use your powers to get rid of these dumbasses?"

"*Mike!*" she whisper-yelled, exasperated. She thumped his arm. "I do *not* have powers. I already told you."

Mike made his best disbelieving face.

"Alright, have it your way," he said. "But floating lamps aren't the norm where I'm from."

El huffed and followed him as he made his way to the stairs leading down to the garage. They kept low, trying not to cast shadows across the windows.

They'd made it halfway across the room when the unmistakable sound of something ramming the front door made them both jump. They looked back at the door. Something rammed into it again, hard. There was a sharp crack as the doorframe began to break.

El stood and moved to position herself between Mike and the door, which he was definitely not okay with. As he tried to pull her back behind him, the door finally gave after one last effort from the intruder. The deadbolt lock broke through the door frame, splinters spraying across the floor.

Troy came crashing through the doorway, leading with his shoulder. Three of his minions piled in behind him.

"Ohhh, so you *are* at home, Wheeler!" he said, a stupid, wide grin on his face. "How come you didn't answer when I called for you? You two a little . . . *busy*?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"What are you doing here, Troy?" Mike replied, still trying to budge a surprisingly firm El, who was looking at Troy like maybe she wanted to become the murderer she'd been made out to be.

Mike gave up trying to pull her behind him, instead stepping forward to stand next to her. She lifted an arm in front of his chest and gave him a warning glance. He was pretty sure her expression said, *you're not taking another step forward, moron*.

"Oh, you know. Just doling out a little vigilante justice. Kind of like Batman!" he said, snapping a finger. "You're into all that nerdy comic shit, right? I'm sure you understand."

"Yeah," Mike said. "You say justice, but somehow I get the feeling you're here for the other thing. She's innocent, Troy. She didn't do it. So, why don't you and your friends just go on home before this

becomes something way worse than it needs to be."

"Ha," said Troy, without an ounce of humor in his voice. "Fat chance of that. Your little freak of a girlfriend is gonna get what's coming to her, and I ain't leaving till it's done."

"I'm serious, Troy," Mike said. He was trying to keep a brave face, but he could feel the nervousness starting to seep through the cracks in his facade. "Don't go through with this. It'll be bad for all of us. Jane didn't kill those people. I promise. She was right in front of me when it all happened."

"I don't give a rat's ass who she did or didn't kill. Did you know this bitch broke my arm back in middle school?" he said, gesturing violently at El.

Mike could only stare, confused.

"That's right," Troy went on. "She's like a freaky Russian super weapon or some shit. She broke my arm right in half with her damn mind just for going after her little queer friends. Then Hopper goes all soft, covers the whole thing up — and adopts her! Dumbass must've thought I'd forget what she looks like. Not a chance."

Mike shook his head, not following.

"The hell are you talking about Troy?"

"Forget it, Wheeler," he said. "Just know that nobody's gonna miss your little pet now that she's a murderer. Now step aside so I can take care of this. I'll be doing the whole town a favor. Shit, I'll be doing the whole country a favor, and I'm the only one with the balls to do it."

"Take care of this?" Mike said, increasingly panicked. "What does that even—"

Troy lifted his shirt, pulling a black handgun from the waistline of his jeans. A couple of his friends pulled knives, steel blades glinting in the morning light drifting through the door. The third boy brandished a baseball bat that Mike noticed for the first time.

"Woah, woah!" Mike yelled, voice cracking in rising fear. His body was covered in a cold sheen of sweat. He raised his hands in a placating gesture, trying and failing, once again, to step in front of El.

El, whose eyes were cold, sharp, and brittle — shards of razor ice.

El, whose hands did not shake.

El, who stood unafraid, as if four armed boys were simply a nuisance she hated having to deal with, not an imminent threat to her life.

Mike's throat was unreasonably dry. He tried to form words, but it felt like he'd chugged a bottle of cough syrup. Everything was too slow. His mouth felt impossibly thick, too heavy to move.

He couldn't stop what was about to happen.

El stepped forward, unfazed by the myriad of weapons leveled at her.

Troy raised his gun and pulled the hammer back.

Mike was stuck, drowning in a pool of honey. He found his voice, though.

"DON'T SHOOT! TROY, DON'T FUCKING SHOOT!"

There was a sharp, deafening *bang*.

Mike's ears rang.

He could no longer feel his heart beating.

His eyes locked onto El, roving up and down her form, waiting to see the blood, waiting to see her drop to the ground.

She stood where she had been standing, apparently unhurt. Smoke curled from the barrel of Troy's gun, aimed directly at El's chest, his arm still outstretched.

And in between them, suspended in midair, was a tiny, pointed piece of lead.

The bullet.

Mike stared at El, agape. Had she *stopped* it?

As Troy's face morphed from confused to terrified, El raised her arm and shoved outward, hard. Before Mike even knew what was going on, blood splattered from Troy's hand as he dropped his gun, grabbing his wound and loosing a litany of curses. He fell to the floor, blood pouring from a clean, circular hole straight through the middle of his palm.

El stalked toward the group of boys, all except one backing away apprehensively.

"Leave," she said.

Two of the boys backed out of the cabin slowly, but one who possessed a particularly shocking brand of stupidity raised his knife and ran at her.

El flicked her head upward just slightly. The boy went flying backward through the air, straight out the front door. His body slammed into his friends' as they were scampering down the wooden steps of the porch. There was a collective thud and much groaning as they all fell from the steps, planting themselves firmly onto the hard-packed ground.

As Troy lay on the floor, crying and grasping his leaking hand, El turned to face Mike, blood streaming from one nostril.

"Okay," she said, completely serious. "Maybe I do have powers."

It could have been the adrenaline, the sheer unbelievability of the situation, or just relief that El didn't have a bullet in her chest, but after her words registered, he could only laugh. It started small, slightly crazed giggles slipping out of him. He ended up doubled over, clutching his stomach.

"I never would've guessed," he managed to wheeze in-between outbursts.

El's lips curved up slightly, and he was glad to see it. He shared a smile with her, an attempt to convey how relieved he was that she still stood in front of him, living, breathing, talking to him. Still in his

life.

His gaze, though, came to rest on Troy still writhing behind her. Mike sobered quickly, sudden heat rising within him, the sight of Troy breaking his smile like a pile of sand suffocating a fire.

El looked at him in confusion until she saw where he was heading.

Mike approached Troy, stepping over him, planting a foot on either side of the boy. He grabbed him firmly by the shirt and yanked.

"How the hell did you know we were here, Troy?" he said. "Who told you about this place?"

Troy looked at him coldly, eyes still full of tears that streamed freely down his face.

"Go to hell, Wheeler," he said. "I ain't telling you jack shi—"

A dull thud could be heard as Mike's fist slammed into Troy's cheek. A fresh cut bloomed right below the boy's eye, bright red filling the thin line.

"Tell me or it'll get worse," Mike said, emotion tightening his vocal chords. "You tried to kill her."

His words were slow, his face contorted as if he couldn't comprehend in the slightest why anyone would ever want to harm the girl standing behind him; as if he couldn't imagine anyone ever actually harming her.

"You *tried* to *kill* her," he repeating, tears forming in his own eyes. Red tinged the edges of his vision. Insanity bubbled in his brain, clouding his judgement, venom in his veins. He knew it couldn't be a good look.

You had to give Troy just a bit of credit. He was impressively stubborn.

"Oh, for crying out loud, don't try to act like I almost killed the love of your life. Jeez, Wheeler, you barely know this girl. All anyone has to do is look at her to know you're only hanging around to screw her,

so don't act like—"

Another thud, another punch delivered. It was strange how different it sounded in real life than it did in the movies. It was quieter, deeper. More unsettling. You could hear the brain cells dying, colonies at a time.

Troy's lip was busted, already swelling. He spat blood onto Mike's face.

"How'd you know where to find us?" Mike asked again.

"Fuck off."

Mike raised his fist and Troy cringed, trying to bring an arm up to defend himself.

"Alright, alright!" he said.

Mike held off, waiting.

"Me and the guys had a chat with your drummer," he said. "Not a friendly chat, either. We messed him up a bit. After that, he told us you might be here."

Mike shook his head.

"Does anyone else know we're here?" he asked.

Troy shrugged. "Well, the guys obviously knew," he said, nodding toward the doorway. "But it looks like they're long gone."

Mike stared at him, hand still fisted in his shirt, holding him up of the floor. He watched the blood run down his face, wishing it would bring him some kind of satisfaction.

"Listen to me," Mike said. "You're lucky I don't choke you death on your own teeth. But that can still be arranged. That means you're not going to tell a single person where we are or what happened here, and it also means that you're never going to so much as glance in Jane's direction again. You don't touch her, you don't speak to her, you don't look at her."

He paused, wondering if there was anything else he should add to his demands. Nothing came to mind except the desire to bash Troy's skull in.

"We clear?" Mike asked.

Troy looked at him, hatred apparent in every feature of his face. His eyes flicked to the side, presumably landing on El, whose presence Mike could feel over his shoulder.

Troy's eyes came back to Mike's.

"Crystal," Troy gritted out between his teeth.

"Good," said Mike, throwing him back to the floor with such force that his head knocked against the hardwood. "Now get out of here."

Troy winced, standing, still grasping his hand that was now more porous than it ever had been. He stumbled out the front door and down the steps, jogging dazedly down the hill and out of sight.

Mike stood and sighed, turning to say something to El. He was surprised to find himself face to face with her, mere inches separating them.

Immediately, he could tell something was wrong. The hard look of anger and determination had vanished from her face. You never would have known that the girl in front of him now was even capable of wearing such an expression.

Tears cohered in her eyes, forming a wall of wavering glass. She looked equal parts miserable, afraid, and small.

Mike looked at her questioningly. "El?" he said, gently. "Are you okay?"

"I didn't want you to know," she said. "I didn't want you to think I'm a — a freak. A monster."

He could tell she was holding back the sobs. The tremor in her voice, the subtle hiccups that Mike would think cute if they weren't the result of pain.

He wanted to be reassuring. He wanted to be kind and calm; he wanted her to know that this didn't change the way he felt about her at all — that, if anything, it only drew him to her more.

But he couldn't get over the idea that she thought she was a — had she said *freak*?

"*What?*" was all he managed at first.

El took a slight shuffle step back, clearly not knowing what to make of his reaction. Mike followed her, not letting the distance between them grow.

Her brows came down, her eyes confused and traveling toward hurt.

"What?" she parroted back to him.

Mike shook his head, his frizzy locks flying left and right.

"You think you're a *freak*? A *monster*?" he asked. He raised his arm slowly, grabbing her hand. "El, that couldn't be further from the truth. That's the second time you've saved my life in two days."

"He was trying to kill me, not you," she said.

"And you think he would have just let me walk free after witnessing a murder?" he shot back.

"And at the party," she went on, "you were only fighting because of me, anyway . . . it was my fault he almost hurt you."

"Yes, because it is *entirely* your fault when your clone decides to murder somebody."

"Mike—"

"El!" he said before she could go on trying to tear herself down. "You've gotta stop! Listen to me, okay?"

He grasped her other hand in his free one so that he held both as he looked at her.

"You — you're one of the best things that's happened to me in a long time . . ." he said, low, resisting the urge to mumble. It wasn't the easiest thing in the world to share his *feelings*, but it was easier with her.

He blushed, and he could see the warmth rising up her neck as well.

"I mean . . . I haven't been in the greatest place since — well, I guess since I split with the guys. I've had other friends and stuff, I've had my bandmates. But it just isn't the same. It's just been kind of . . . I don't know. Lonely, I guess. And shitty. And I don't know. I don't even know why I'm saying all of this, it probably sounds stupid, and I just wanted—"

"Mike," she said. Her turn to stop his nonsense. "I understand."

She squeezed his hands, reassuring.

"Oh," he said quietly, not knowing what else to say. "You do?"

She nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Cool."

"Cool," she echoed, the ghost of a smile returning to her lips.

"El," he said. "My whole point, before I started rambling like an idiot . . . it's just — everything has been better with you."

Her smile grew, the glow bleeding into her eyes.

"I really like spending time with you," he said.

"I really like spending time with *you*," she told him. "You make everything better, too."

He sighed, feeling the anchor rise off his chest. They'd made progress. It was a good start.

"And I mean," he said, "I'd be lying if I said I'm not like, floored by all of this. Obviously there's a ton I want to know, and a ton that I'm confused about. I'm still pretty convinced this is a dream or a bad

trip. But I guess . . . sorting out all of that can wait. I'm just so damn happy you're alive right now."

Surprising him, El threw her arms around Mike, pulling him close. He reciprocated, holding her, and they stood there, enjoying each other and enjoying the fact that they enjoyed each other.

"You have blood on your face," she said after a minute.

"You do too," he replied.

"Cool."

"Cool."

Thank you all so much for reading and responding. Any support you give this story is appreciated more than you know, and I love hearing from all of you. I've tried to respond to most reviews, and especially PMs. If somehow you slipped through there without a message from me, please accept my thanks *now.*

I also had a guest tell me that they came here after an author they read recommended my story. I'd love to know who that author is so I can thank them, but also so I can check out their work.

Last thing: No one sent me cool ST fics to read! Please help me out with this!

Oh, wait. Last Last thing: I'm really sorry if the updates slow down. It's not my plan to slow it down, but I'm currently a school teacher and the year begins on the 26th for me.

11. Chapter 11

Clouds of dust swirled behind the old, beat-up chevy pickup as it charged down the dirt road, chipped red paint dull in the pale morning light sifting through the nearly naked winter pines. The engine grumbled in a way that inspired little confidence as the mostly bald tires spun against the packed ground, losing their grip every now and then, forcing Mike to keep on his toes.

"He got it used," Mike had offered as an explanation, no doubt seeing the apprehension on El's face. "Doesn't really drive it except to get to the lake, but it runs well enough to get us a ways."

El sat on the leather bench seat that may have once been a single distinguishable color. Stained foam poked through rips in the ancient material, brushing abrasively against the washed denim of her borrowed jeans that fit almost unsettlingly well. They were Audrey's again, from the same overnight bag she'd left and never returned for after she and Mike split up. The sweater and the supple, brown leather jacket El had on were also Audrey's.

El couldn't say that she liked playing dress-up as Mike's ex, but it beat freezing to death. She was thankful to be fully covered as she watched her breath puff out in front of her, a piping steam compared to the surely Alaskan temperatures in the truck. Why was Indiana so damn cold? The lab had never been warm, but it had also never been *frigid*.

El recalled Max's stories of bonfires on the beach during the Christmas season in California. Late nights in torn jeans and oversized t-shirts, cruising up and down the hilly San Diego streets, the ocean sprawled out below and beyond like an infinite blue tapestry wavering in the wind.

Yes, California sounded nice. Maybe she'd visit with Max someday. Maybe she'd never come back. If only she could get everyone to come with her.

The biting stench of cigarette smoke clung to every surface on the interior of the truck, and El found herself itching for one of the

unfiltered Camels that she'd sneak from Hop when she could.

"Hey, I'm really sorry we haven't been able to check up on Max yet," Mike said, speaking over the growl of the positively rust-riddled v6. "I know you've probably been worrying about her since we didn't see her after the party. We're gonna get to a phone as soon as we can, okay? We'll have to be careful. But we'll make some calls."

El shook her head. "I saw her," she said. "She's freaking out, but she's okay."

Mike squinted. "You saw her?" he said. "What do you mean? When?"

El sighed. She wasn't so thrilled to be talking about the void after what she had seen there just this morning.

"I can find people if I focus on them," she said. "I go to a dark, quiet place in my head. If I think about someone hard enough, I can usually see them and hear them like they're really next to me."

El couldn't decide if Mike looked pained, confused, or impressed. She decided it probably wasn't impossible to be all at once.

Mike made a breathy noise that sounded vaguely like a "woah."

"Mike?" she said. "You okay?"

He spared her a quick glance before the tires slipped again, rubber racing vainly against the grainy dirt. He tugged the wheel, correcting to the left instinctually.

"Um," he said, running a hand through his untamed hair once they had stabilized once again. "Sorry, yeah, I just . . . you're serious, aren't you?"

El looked at him. She wondered what it would be like to be in his position. To be *normal*. To be hearing about these kinds of things for the first time.

"Yeah," she said, almost apologetic. "I am."

"Yeah," he said, breathing out heavy. "Yeah, that's, that's definitely . .

."

She raised an eyebrow at him.

There was a moment in which the only noise was engine guzzling gasoline, the road slipping away behind them. It was a moment during which El was sure she couldn't see Mike breathing.

And then, the exhale.

"Holy shit, this is crazy," he said. "I mean, kind of totally awesome, yeah, but also completely, entirely insane. Like, I don't think I would've believed it if I hadn't already seen what you can do, and obviously like, it's totally cool and everything — what you can do I mean — like, I don't think it's weird or anything, it's just kind of like I'm in a movie but it's also crazier than that because—"

"Mike," she said. "Breathe."

She could see the sweat beading on his forehead, droplets preparing to fall if they didn't freeze solid right there against his skin. He was paler than usual, if that was possible. She reached over slowly, trying not to startle him. She pulled his right hand from where it rested on the shift and wrapped hers around it.

She had expected this to happen sooner or later. It was all catching up with him. The murders at the house party, being on the run, watching her use her powers. She had to remind herself that nightmare already infused much of her life: otherworldly monsters, heartless men in lab coats, years of nothing but cold tile and glass, endless prodding and poking, solitary confinement, the weight of taking a human's life — the works.

He, on the other hand, was unaccustomed. Her world was introducing itself to his, and rapidly.

"I get it," she said, softly. "It's a lot."

Mike looked at her, then — probably longer than he should have considering he was driving.

She felt his hand finally respond to hers, adjusting his grip to grasp

her more firmly. She gave him a light squeeze, ignoring the moisture covering his palm. He tried for a small smile, but she could still see the thoughts whirring behind his eyes, frame by rapid frame like a movie reel. He looked back to the road.

"You don't have to stay with me," she said reluctantly. Mike leaving her alone was the absolute last thing she wanted, but him staying out of some misplaced feeling of chivalric obligation was nearly as bad. "Mike, you've done enough for me. None of this is your fault. You don't have to—"

"What? El, *hell* no."

El's breath hitched. She couldn't help but stare at him, dark curls finding their stubborn way to his forehead. She could barely catch the side of his eyes from her position but, even from her angle, she could see the hardness in them — El knew the look. She knew she wore it sometimes. It was a look that said, unabashedly, *this is not a discussion*.

"There is no way I'm leaving you, okay? You're not getting rid of me. So don't even think about it."

El felt the tears brimming in her eyes, and she had to try not to scoff at herself. Gosh, was there an hour of any day when she *didn't* cry?

She couldn't find it in herself to care too much in the moment, though.

It struck her that no one had ever accepted her so readily. Even Dustin and Lucas, who had found her in the midst of a deluge and decided to take her in, had acted exceedingly cautious and skeptical to begin with — especially Lucas, who had taken quite a while to actually warm up to the idea of befriending her. She remembered how scared they'd been of her when she'd shut the door on them and refused to let them tell their parents.

And yet, here was Mike.

Ever since she'd started going to school, El had struggled with the idea that she was a thoroughly unimpressive person without her

powers. She didn't know even a quarter of the stuff that her friends knew, and she could hardly speak like a normal teenager. Honestly, that stuff wouldn't have bothered her so much. She liked to fly under the radar.

She did remember her friends telling her that she was an instant "popular girl" when she'd first showed up to school. Girls like Stacy and Jennifer had waylaid her as soon as they'd found the opportunity, itching to take her under their wings. She'd never felt comfortable with those girls, though.

Her brief stint in the popular limelight had burned out quick as she continued to show the entire school that she was committed to the party — and while she wasn't some kind of shunned social pariah around school because of this choice, she was definitely no Stacy or Jennifer. And that was a relief.

El could admit to herself that she sort of understood why everyone in school thought she belonged with the popular crowd. She *looked* like a popular girl. She knew that. And the image only further solidified as Nancy continued to help her form her own style.

But El knew in her heart that if those kids got to know her, they'd only think of her as a freak, or a "weirdo," as Lucas had called her when he first met her. She knew that's what she was, and she knew there was no use denying it.

And if they *really* got to know her — if they ever saw what she was really capable of . . . well, she had no doubt that most of them would be terrified.

And yet, Mike Wheeler.

Mike Wheeler who had known her for about a week which, admittedly, was long enough for him to find out that she wasn't a brilliant conversationalist with a winning personality. It was long enough for him to discover that she wasn't exactly thriving in school like he was, wasn't exactly the brightest. It was certainly long enough for him to become acquainted with just how unwittingly awkward she could be, the effect of her socially deprived childhood rearing its ugly head.

It was long enough (apparently, the universe had decided) for him to witness the unnatural things she could do, long enough for him to know he should bolt given the first opportunity.

But it was also long enough for him to figure out that, most days, she really was just a number.

011.

What had she done to deserve *El*?

Nothing.

She was best only as a number. She knew this. Nondescript, unoffensive, innocuous.

It was better to fade into the gray than to be a burden, and when she wasn't careful to stay out of the way, to remain on the fringes, she knew she became a burden. She messed things up. It had been proven, time and time again.

It was her fault her friends' lives had become so irreversibly screwed, anyway. If she hadn't freaked out like some kind of spaz in the bath on that one, horrifying yet hopeful day, her friends would never have known the Upside Down even existed. And she wouldn't have, either.

Barb wouldn't have died. Bob wouldn't have died. Benny wouldn't have died. Will wouldn't have had to go through hell — twice. The psychological trauma and the nightmares wouldn't plague every single person she loved.

And yet, she would never have gotten the chance to love them in the first place if she hadn't accidentally forged a gateway to another dimension. The bad men would never have taken their focus off of her. She never would have broken out of her cell, never would've crawled through that drainage pipe.

Was it selfish to prefer what had happened to a life in her cold, experimental prison?

Her mind warred with itself every time she thought about it; she could feel the familiar pinched pain in her head like her brain was

twisting itself up, self-destructing.

She wished that her freedom didn't have to come at the cost of her friends' happiness and safety. She wanted the best for them. They deserved it.

And that really was the worst of it — but of course, it wasn't all of it.

Whether it was a question she asked at just the wrong time, prompting an exasperated glance from Lucas; a night at home after Hopper got off a double shift, but she desperately needed help with her homework, drawing one of the long, haggard sighs she so hated to hear; the look on her friends' faces as they passed Mike in the hallway, spitting on the memory of what had once been an inseparable brotherhood.

El knew she caused problems. So, she did her best to help when she could, and tried to stay out of the way. She wondered if her life would ever be worth the sacrifice everyone had made to give it to her. She hoped so. She hoped some day that she would be able to do for them what they had done for her.

El felt Mike squeeze her hand for a change, yanking her out of the rabbit hole she'd dug herself down into.

"You okay over there?" he asked. "You look like you're in pain."

She considered him for a moment, the sunlight illuminating his freckles, the line of his jaw cutting sharply down to his chin. Her heart ached with the longing of all the ways she wanted him. Just *wanted*. Anything he would give her.

She almost would have rather jumped out of the truck than have to say it again, but she cared too much for him already. She had to, for him.

"Mike, really," she said. "You can still get out of this. You don't have to stay. You could get hurt. You could *die*. Your whole life might change."

Mike didn't cut her off this time, and he didn't respond immediately. Instead, he pulled his hand out of her hers.

She began to panic. Maybe he'd really take the out she'd given him. And while she'd gain a little relief because he'd be out of harm's way, she had to keep from shaking with worry at the thought of going back to being that little girl alone in the forest, hiding from a society that didn't understand her.

Mike wiped his hand on his jeans, throwing her a sheepish, apologetic smile. "Sorry my hand's so sweaty," he said. Then, he reached for her hand again, holding it firmly, reassuring.

She had no idea why, but she knew her fate was sealed in that small, impossibly ordinary moment. Her heart could have powered a nuclear submarine, it was pumping so much heat through her body.

Mike didn't respond to her offer for another minute. Eventually, a sad sounding sigh brushed through his lips.

"I don't know why you think I don't *want* to be here with you," he said. "I told you, El. You make everything . . . better. And I don't care that we're together right now because you're wanted for murder and we're hiding from the cops, and asshole wannabe vigilantes. I mean, I do care. But you get what I mean. Honestly, this, with you — in a weird way, it's better than the past few years of my life have been."

El couldn't respond. She wasn't good with words like him. Everything she could think to say seemed vastly underwhelming, and didn't capture what she felt.

"At least I'm . . . *feeling* something, you know?" he added when she was silent. "A lot, actually."

And suddenly, El's body was alight. She was sure she glowed like a house on Christmas Eve.

Her mind filled with a different kind of memories; memories that didn't involve tired, sunken faces haunted by sleepless terror-laden nights; memories of joy, burning so easily through the disappointment.

She recalled the first Halloween when she'd been allowed to go trick-or-treating, and even though the boys and Max had claimed they

were too old, they'd been so excited to go with her, watching her face light up at every door, anticipating what kind of treat she'd get next, watching how people reacted to her costume.

She'd dressed up as Mary Poppins, since Hop had showed her the movie only a few weeks prior.

Another memory rolled in front of her mind's eye, gentle and warm, like calm waves lapping at the shore on a summer day: Lucas, Max and Will rolling on the floor of her living room, laughing after she'd revealed the results of the makeover she'd given Dustin. El had done a pretty good job, really. But it wasn't subtle. Dustin made an interesting looking girl, untamable curls slicked back and held partially down by gel, faint blush on his cheeks, shadow around his eyes, gloss shining on his lips.

What had really done it, though, was the dress. A frilly purple sundress that El hadn't quite grown into yet. Dustin had ripped some of the seams, but it was beyond worth it.

El remembered late nights cuddled up next to Hopper, watching movies; days spent shopping at the mall with Joyce; D&D campaigns lasting entire days, so draining but fulfilling, she may as well have been on a real fantastical journey.

She remembered her first Christmas, Hopper giddy like a tween girl, trying and failing to hide wide smiles under his mustache as he watched tear open present after present. She remembered the look of surprise on his face, the single tear that had fallen as he opened the framed picture of the two of them Joyce had helped her with.

At least I'm feeling something, Mike had said.

Feelings.

It was all she could do not to burst into tears of joy every time she thought about the letter Hop had written.

El had come home from school one day, looking far more dejected than usual. It had been one of the days she'd gathered enough courage to try to talk to Mike. Of course, he hadn't even heard her.

She'd also failed a test *and* spilled her lunch that day, and though that was beside the point, it hadn't helped.

She had trudged up to her room, her gloomy aura radiating outward, written plainly across the features of her face, carried in the way she held herself.

Hopper'd been home that day, filling out paperwork at the kitchen table. He watched her drag herself inside and mumble a perfunctory "hey" before heading up the stairs.

She had only groaned an acknowledgment into her bed at the sound of the knock on her door. He'd come inside to see her laying face down with her head in a pillow. She'd felt the edge of the bed dip dramatically as it took on his considerable weight.

"Hey, kid," he'd said, gentle fatherly voice in full effect. "Everything okay?"

Considering how much they had gone through together, and what she had already experienced in her own life, El had always thought it kind of stupid that the little things could still affect her like this — that she could still have normal, teenage girl problems.

She didn't respond. She didn't need to bother him with something so trivial, so childish.

"Eleven," he'd said. "Hey . . . you know you can tell me anything, right?" She felt the familiar, comforting weight of his hand on her shoulder, squeezing lightly.

She rolled over, sitting up against the headboard to face him. "I'm okay, Hop," she said. "It's . . . girl stuff. Feelings."

Girl stuff. Rarely did El ever talk about her feelings, but when she had grown comfortable enough with the boys, she had tried once to vent to them about how much having a crush sucked. Lucas had quickly shut down the possibility of any "girl talk," saying that he really didn't want to hear about that side of her life, and that she should talk to Max.

Max, of course, had been more than happy to talk to El about the

woes and pains of having an unreciprocated crush. So, El had figured Lucas was right. It was *girl stuff*.

She saw no reason to pester Hopper, who stayed busy enough, with girl stuff.

"Oh," he'd said. "Well, I know I'm no Joyce or Nancy, but . . . you know you can talk to me about your feelings too, right?"

El had smiled. "It's okay, Hop."

And they'd left it at that, Hopper ruffling her hair before returning, reluctantly, to his paperwork awaiting him downstairs.

Or at least, El had *thought* he'd left it at that. She'd thought so until she'd come home early from a party sleepover at Will's one night, Joyce dropping her off after she'd gotten sick and didn't feel up to staying the night.

The house was empty, which made sense. She remembered Hopper grumbling about working late.

She'd wandered into the kitchen while floating a glass telekinetically out of the cabinet and into her hand, filling it with water from the tap. As she gulped her water, she turned and walked to the edge of the counter, where something out of place caught her eye.

There was a sheet of paper, creased and worn like it had been folded and shoved into a pocket a few too many times. Hopper's pen still lay across the sheet, pinning it to the counter.

She hadn't meant to read it, but a word had caught her eye.

Eggos.

And then came the sentence that the word was attached to. And the sentences following that one.

And then I left some Eggos out in the woods, and you came into my life. For the first time in a long time, I started to feel things again. I started to feel happy.

And then it was only a small step from there to read the whole thing. And that's when Hopper had walked in looking exhausted, already untucking his shirt and heading to the fridge, no doubt to grab a beer.

He stopped abruptly when he finally looked up and saw El standing in front of him, fingers still clutching the letter, hand trembling and tears welling in her eyes.

"Hop," she croaked, choked beyond belief.

"Oh," was his response. They stood and looked at each other for a moment.

"Yeah," he continued. "I didn't really mean to leave that out, it was supposed to be like a heart-to-heart kind of a—"

But she was already in his arms, crying into his uniform, the smell of tobacco clinging to the cotton filling her nose, comforting.

"I just wanted you to feel like you could talk to me about anything," he said, struggling to keep his own voice even. He cleared his throat, rubbing soothing circles on her back. "Even your gross, girly feelings," he added jokingly. "And then it just . . . I don't know. It turned into something else."

She laughed. "I love you," she said.

"Yeah," he breathed. "I love you too, kid."

El felt Mike readjust his grip on her hand and her eyes refocused on the dirty windshield of the truck, Mike pulling her back from her little time travel excursion. She noticed the rabbit's foot hanging from the rearview mirror, swinging hypnotically.

"Hey, seriously, are you okay?" Mike asked. "Sorry if that's too much, I just — it felt right to say it."

His words came back to her, full-force. *You make everything better. I'd rather be here with you, running from the law and psycho clones, than go back to my normal life.* At least, that was the gist of it, she guessed. She hadn't the slightest clue as to why, but she wasn't going to argue

with it.

She felt like she might levitate out of her seat if she weren't strapped down by the seatbelt.

"No, it's not," she said, trying her best to be reassuring. "It's not too much. Thank you, Mike."

He risked a glance at her. She caught his eyes, warm but still unsure. "Really. Thank you. I'm glad you're here with me, too."

He smiled and looked back to the winding dirt road.

"Hey, I should be the one thanking you," he said. "I never thought I'd get to run from the law with a real Jedi. This is already way better than any movie plot I could've come up with."

She smirked, glad they could get back to joking around despite the danger that still loomed over them.

"I'm not a real Jedi," she said. "Real Jedi don't bleed from their noses when they use the force. And they don't get tired when they use it, either."

"Still," Mike said. "You've gotta be the closest thing to the genuine article alive."

"Maybe," said El. "You never know. Luke could still be out there somewhere."

"You are aware that *Star Wars* is, like, not real, right? It's not a documentary, El," he said, holding back laughter.

"How do you know?" she asked. "Would you have believed I have powers if you hadn't seen?"

"Fair point," he said.

"If I *was* a Jedi," El began, a grin growing on her face, "maybe I'd train you. Like Yoda and Luke."

Mike laughed, breath rushing out of him like he'd been holding it the

entire time they'd been in the truck. El watched his shoulders loosen, his arms become a little less rigid, more of his natural color return to his face.

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Would you make me carry you around on my back, too?"

"That's the whole point," El retorted. "I shouldn't walk when I don't have to. I'm the master. I'm not green and old. But I'm the master."

"Wait," Mike said, faux-confusion written on his face, "you're *not* green and old?" He glanced at El, squinting as if attempting to correct his vision. "Could've fooled me."

She gasped dramatically, something she'd seen on her soaps so many times she could do it like she was born with the ability. "Take it back," she said, squeezing his hand, which she'd noticed was *still* holding hers. She had no qualms with it.

"Fine," he said, "I take it back. You're much cuter than Yoda. I'd be lucky to carry you around all day."

Mike blushed, like he hadn't called her "a thousand times more beautiful" than his previous girlfriend just last night. Of course, the cover of nightfall always made such admissions exponentially easier, and now the sun beamed through the dusty, dirt-caked windshield of the ancient Chevy, stark upon the faces of the two runaways grasping each others' hands from across the tattered bench seat.

The light of day bathed everything in truth, a grounding and sobering reality, so present — almost unbearably so. Intimate revelations were always so simple at night, but even El could feel the tension the word "cute" caused in broad daylight, the two of them wide awake and completely unaided by the influence of gin.

Mike cleared his throat, eyes darting around as if he could find the words that would make him feel less awkward hidden somewhere within the dusty truck.

El also found herself at a loss. She was surprised. She figured maybe they'd had more to drink last night than they'd thought, since they'd

been so open with each other without issue.

"So," Mike said, apparently grasping those words he'd been looking for, "you said this place is over off Denfield, right?"

"Yeah," said El. "Take Denfield until you see a dirt road by a big oak tree on the right."

"Got it," Mike said. "We should be coming up on Denfield soon. It's on the outskirts, kind of like Donald's cabin is. This road we're on just circles the woods around the edge of the city."

El nodded, wondering if she should acknowledge that Mike had just called her cute. Should she do something? Did that mean he liked her? Like, *like* likedher? She'd never dated before. How did you go about starting all of that stuff, anyway? What were you supposed to do? Were you supposed to sign something?

"Hey, El," Mike said, a quality to his voice she couldn't place. "You said you checked on Max. Did . . . did you check on the guys, too?"

"Yes," El gave another nod. "They're with Max. Or, they were when I looked. I should call them soon, Mike. And Hop. They're all worried."

"They seem to care about you a lot," Mike said, his throat clamping down around his words, tight and constricted.

El looked at him. "They do," El said. "They're good. Good people. They saved me."

"So," he said, "I guess they know? I mean, about your powers and stuff."

"Yes," she said. "They do."

It was quiet between them for a moment as the truck barreled down the road over a patch of dead leaves, brittle and dry, cascading behind the wheels like waves.

"Wait," Mike piped up, "is Eleven — is that your *real* name?"

He looked at her, trusting his hand to keep them steady on the

straight road ahead of them.

She held her arm up and pulled the sleeves of both the sweater and the jacket down below her wrist so that the "011" that had been emblazoned there for as long as she could remember was visible.

Mike's eyes went wide. He turned back to the road.

If it was too hot to wear long sleeves, El usually used a combination of hair ties and subtle concealer to keep the number from showing. She'd had some close calls when she'd been worried someone had seen it before, but no one had ever said anything to her about it.

"What . . ." Mike began, "I mean, where — how—"

"I'll tell you everything, Mike. Just not now."

He nodded. "Okay," he said. "Okay."

He looked calmer than he had when she'd told him she could find people with her mind, but a heaviness weighed on his shoulders. It was as if his leather jacket was made of lead.

"You said the guys saved you?" he asked.

"Yeah," El replied. "Dustin and Lucas. Took me in after I escaped the — after I escaped a bad place."

Mike nodded. "They're good people. Like you said. Honestly, I wish we were still friends. It's just . . . it seemed like they didn't really want to be my friends anymore. One day everything is great, then I leave for Chicago for just a little while, come back, and everything is all wrong. They never told me what it was."

His words were a dagger in El's heart.

She knew exactly what they couldn't tell him. She knew exactly why everything had gone wrong.

And what was worse was that she couldn't bring herself to tell him. She knew she would have to when she told him her story. But right now, she couldn't. So she stared ahead, uncomfortably aware of their

hands still clasped together, wishing there was a graceful way to retract hers because of the sheer guilt consuming her.

For a moment, she was thankful as Mike pulled his hand away from hers to reach into his jacket for something. Peripherally, she saw the glint of metal as he raised something to his lips. She glanced over at him as he tucked a flask back into his jacket. Her eyebrows crept south.

It wasn't even noon. And he was driving.

She let it slide. He didn't reach back over for her hand.

The cabin finally came into view, and Mike and El made their way toward what she had told him was her first real home.

They'd parked the truck a ways back out of necessity, unable to take it all the way to the little structure through the densely wooded forest. El took the lead, her shoes plowing through the carpet of leaves upon the forest floor.

Eventually, she came to an abrupt stop, holding her arm out to block Mike from moving forward.

"It's still here," she mumbled.

"What is?" he asked. "The cabin?"

"No," she said. "The tripwire. I almost didn't see it." She crouched down, motioning for Mike to do the same. With one delicate finger, she drew his attention to the thin wire running horizontally between two trees. From the right angle, you could just catch the sunlight hitting it.

"Step over," she said, demonstrating by rising and stepping gingerly over the wire herself.

"Holy shit, if I trip this thing, is a shotgun gonna blow my face off or something? Giant axe in the tree? Why did you just step over that thing like it was no big deal? Can you, like, float me over there or something? Maybe I'll just go around."

"What?" El said. "No, Mike, just step over." She trying not to laugh, he could tell. "You can't get hurt. It's just a loud noise. So we know if someone is coming."

"Yeah, loud noise like a damn grenade or something. Hopper's a cop. Who knows what he's got rigged up here," he said. "Do you know?"

El laughed for real now. He loved he sound of it: light and breathy, the low, feminine tone of her voice softening the edges in the most soothing way. He didn't even care if it was at his expense.

"He told me it was a bullet — well, a *round*," she shrugged. "A blank, though. Means there isn't really a bullet. Just powder. A loud bang."

He supposed that was reassuring, but knowing how clumsy his giraffe limbs could be, he'd break the wire and scare the both of them half to death.

Another laugh spilled from El's lips, light as spring rain. "Here," she said, holding out a hand to steady him as he stepped over. He grabbed it and, one leg at a time, stepped carefully over the wire.

"You're um," El began, "you're really pair-uh-noid. Paranoid. Is that the word?" She dropped his hand and turned to walk up to the cabin. He joined her.

Mike chuckled. "Yeah, that's the word," he confirmed, falling into step with her, bumping her shoulder. "Smartypants," he tagged on, and she gave him an adorable smirk. "You've gotta remember. You're the superhero. I'm new to all of this stuff. And after everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, I don't think you can blame me for being a little on edge."

El shook her head seriously. "I don't blame you," she said.

Mike followed her up the wooden steps, almost running into her as she halted at the front door.

She stared into the chipped, decaying green paint behind the dilapidated screen door. She took a deep breath in and out through her nose, a dramatic rise and fall of her chest.

"You okay?" Mike asked.

"Yes," she said automatically, as if trapped in a dream. Her eyes stayed fixed on the door.

He laid a hand on her shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. "El," he said.

She looked over her shoulder at him, haze clearing from her eyes like storm clouds rolling away. "Yeah," she said. "Sorry, I just — haven't been her in a while. A lot happened here."

"I bet," Mike said. "You ready to go in?"

She nodded, pulling the screen door open and taking a step forward. Mike heard a series of metallic clicking and sliding noises before the green wooden door swung open and El strode in, shoes planting themselves firmly upon a floor filmed entirely in dust.

Mike followed her in and shut the door behind them, locking it back just in case.

He'd barely turned back around before El jolted, practically jumping into his arms, shoving his back into the door.

She let out something like a girlish yelp, and his head swung around to survey the space, looking for what had frightened her. His gaze landed on the hulking form of a man sitting at a table far too small to accommodate him. He leaned back, smoking a cigarette, a bottle of bourbon in front of him.

El nearly collapsed against Mike with relief. A little shakily, she extricated herself from Mike's arms, which had somehow wound their way around her.

"Hop," she said, righteous annoyance dripping from the single syllable. "Don't *ever* do that again."

Hopper snorted, standing from his little chair and crushing his cigarette in the smoking ashtray next to the open whiskey bottle.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to scare you. But this is still *my* place,

you know."

El huffed, but practically lunged for him, throwing her arms around his midsection. Hopper didn't respond immediately. For a moment, he stood, no emotion that Mike could place in his eyes. Was he angry at her? Mike would have figured he'd be happy to see her. Unless . . .

Holy shit, what if he thinks she really killed those people?

He brought one arm loosely around El's back, though. "You scared me to death, kid," he said. "I guess it was only fair I scare you a bit in return, huh?"

Some of Mike's fears were assuaged, and he found himself relaxing. That was before Hopper's eyes locked onto him, and he went rigid again. He considered how weird it might look that he's gallivanting around with the man's daughter.

"Wheeler," Hopper said, nodding in acknowledgement. He stepped away from El's embrace and motioned Mike forward. *Okay, so he already knows who I am. Wonder if that's good or bad.*

"Hi, sir," he replied, too stiff. He joined the two of them in the space between the tiny table and the cramped kitchen, reaching forward to shake the chief's hand. He felt small as Hopper's brawny, calloused hand engulfed his comparatively bony one. "How did you know to look for us here?" he asked, surprising himself with the question.

Somehow, seeing Hopper next to El's diminutive, lithe form made him even more gargantuan, though Mike pretty much looked him right in the eye.

"Just call me Chief or Hopper, kid. None of that 'sir' crap. And, to answer your question, I knew El would end up here eventually if she was on the run. Not too many other secluded places to go in a town so small."

"I'm so glad you found us," El said, looking to the man that had become her father. "I don't know what to do. Everyone thinks . . . everyone thinks I killed those two girls, Hop." Mike could see the watery lens of tears that quavered in El's eyes. Until now, he hadn't

really seen all of this — as insane as it was — get to her. Now, reuniting with Hopper, the reality of the last day seemed to be setting in.

"Ah, kid," the chief said, pulling her back into his arms. "The world just doesn't want to give you a break, does it?"

El sniffled against his chest. Mike stood, devoting an embarrassing amount of mental energy to determining what he should do with his hands and where he should look. He felt like an intruder. His eyes wandered around the meager space, observing the tarp-covered furniture coated in layers of dust. Every surface in the room featured a gray, fuzzy adornment of the stuff, reminding Mike of thinly swathed storm clouds.

After a minute and a few murmured words, El and the Chief split, both turning their attention back to Mike.

"So, you two," the Chief began. "I hate to jump right into this, but time isn't really our friend right now. Obviously I know El didn't stab those girls. But, nonetheless, I saw the bodies. I'm gonna need you to tell me everything you saw and everything you know. Don't skip a single detail, alright? No matter how unimportant it may seem."

The teens nodded in tandem, Mike gripping one arm over his chest, still unsure of where he stood with the chief.

"Before we get into that, though — this place is a damn igloo. I'm about to freeze my ass off. Mike, would you mind helping me grab some wood from around back? The fireplace is empty, and I'm gonna ice over if I don't get some warmth in me soon. You kids don't look much better."

Mike licked the chapped, flaky skin on his lips and noticed El's red, windburned cheeks. The chill in his joints combined with the ever-present growing pains wasn't too pleasant, either. Yeah, a fire would be nice.

"Sure," Mike said. "Lead the way."

"Alright," Hopper replied gruffly, snagging his hat off the table,

placing it on his head. "El, why don't you wait here for a minute? Sit down. Take a break. God knows you've been through enough already."

Mike noticed that even Hopper was using the nickname he'd accidentally given her at the concert. He blushed when he realized she must have told the chief that she preferred the abbreviation.

El definitely looked taken off guard, though. She cocked her head to the side, confusion etched across her brows. When Mike was about to follow Hopper out the door, she made a noise of protest.

"Hop, wait," she said, coming forward to slip by Mike. She tugged on the chief's sleeve. "That makes no sense. I can get all the wood we need with my powers," she added. "Easy. I'll only be a minute."

Hopper's face pinched, as if he were contemplating something grave and serious, not the gathering of wood from the back of the cabin.

"Alright," he said slowly. "That works too. Just don't overexert yourself."

El rolled her eyes, such an ordinarily teen expression on such an extraordinarily different girl. "I'll be fine," she said, sliding past her adoptive dad and out the door. "Back in a minute." The door shut behind her, seemingly of its own free will.

Mike wasn't thrilled to be alone with Hopper, and it didn't help when the chief turned on his heel and set those steely eyes on him.

Mike cleared his throat, racking his brain for any way to escape this situation until El returned. "Um, Chief, you mind if I use the bathroom?"

Hopper looked him up and down for another uncomfortable moment. Did everything have to be so intense with this guy? Any more tension charging the air and Mike would implode from the pressure.

"Sure, kid," he said in that same, strangely slow drawl. "Right over there." He gestured to the back of the cabin.

"Thanks," Mike said, restraining himself from sprinting. He crossed

the length of the cabin and stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He went to lock it out of habit but noticed there wasn't one.

Mike turned and greeted his reflection in the mirror. He leaned on the countertop around the bowl of the bone dry sink, a heavy sigh leaving him, his breath still puffing around him like cigarette smoke in the cold house. He looked into his own eyes. There were faint purple bags there, beginning to bruise even though he and El had slept alright the night before. His complexion might've been paler than normal, too, closer to milky than natural.

He pulled the flask he'd refilled at Donald's from his jacket, taking a swig. Hopefully it'd calm him enough to talk to Hopper without completely humiliating himself. He stuffed the thin, metal canister back into his pocket and closed his eyes, taking a moment to compose himself.

He had to do this sometimes, especially before a show. No matter how confident or comfortable he felt playing the songs, anxiousness always found him in front of a crowd. He'd learned that removing himself from the moment for only a minute before each show helped him with the nerves. More often than not, he'd just daydream; go to a happy, warm place he had never known.

Now, though, the familiar landscape of the world he had built for himself in his mind began to morph. He found another scene, another feeling invading his carefully constructed dreamscape.

There lay a beautiful, goddess-like girl only inches away from him. Liquid sunlight washed her hair in a honey hue. Her skin, smooth and unblemished like the finest porcelain, was alluringly tan. Her full, pouting lips parted just enough for the softest of breaths to breeze through and fan the surface of his face; the soft, sloping point of her button nose begging to be kissed. He knew that if those eyelids opened, he'd find himself staring into cast amber unparalleled by any precious gem or stone.

He had to wonder who'd had the nerve to make her. It simply wasn't fair, and he wouldn't be convinced otherwise.

What struck Mike more, still lost in the depths of this vision, was that this wasn't something he'd made up; this was something he had lived — just this morning.

He could feel the luxurious silk sheets slip through his fingers, the plump down pillow under head. His legs were warm where they tangled with El's.

It was the pure intoxication of this reverie that caused Mike not to notice when the bathroom door behind him opened, silently, at a snail's pace.

But there is within every human a sixth sense which alerts the mind to an ominous presence. And in this moment, the frame of Mike's gold-laced daydream turned to sickly black sludge: the color of the fluid in a heavy smoker's lungs.

Mike's eyes snapped open, pupils dilating. What he saw was himself, which was to be expected.

Something unexpected joined him.

The outline surpassed his, that much was certain. A large, round, open maw full of rotating razor teeth; a thick, sinewy body covered by ashy armor plating like the skin of a rhino; long, spindly arms with implausibly large, clawed hands. The rank heat coming from the gaping mouth made the air shiver, mirage-like. Shreds of remains on the teeth. A corpse-filled aroma. Scarlet-stained claws. Fast, heavy, rancid breathing heaving the body. Up, then down. Anticipation.

Mike was full of lightning. Zeus' master bolt to the chest. Fifty tasers on each limb. Locked up. Heart still, in the throat.

In the mirror, he watched a monstrous hand drape over his shoulder. But it wasn't what he felt. He felt the hand of a man, firm and strong. If you'd felt the weight and the grip of the hand, you'd know that it was calloused. A hand that had been used.

The hand tugged at him, spinning him around to face the entryway where Mike knew hell awaited him.

Instead, Hopper smirked at him, mirthless. His eyes held no soul. "Sorry, kid," he said. "But a man's gotta eat."

The hand not on Mike's shoulder latched onto his throat with serpent-like speed. Hopper slammed Mike's head backward into the mirror. A shattering noise accompanied a dull fuzziness in his head, the world filling with TV static. Shards tinkled against the counter, a horrid wind chime.

Mike gulped and sputtered for air, his hands flailing uselessly against Hopper's arm, unable to budge the iron vice hold.

Mike was tempted to accept his fate until his hand came down hard on the counter, enclosing around something long and jagged.

He brought the shard down, with force, into Hopper's arm. He embedded the glass about halfway into the flesh of the forearm and ripped it outward, hanging onto the weapon.

An inhuman shriek pierced the walls of the cabin and Mike was allowed to breath in ragged, burning breaths.

As the chief gripped his wound, Mike shoved off from the counter and shouldered past the larger man, sprinting for the front door. He grabbed the knob, turned, and bust out into the daylight.

"EL!" he yelled, as loud as his raspy, ruined voice would let him. *"EL!"*

He scrambled down the steps, slipping when his feet hit the leafy ground. He ran to the side of the cabin faster than he'd ever moved before, rounding the corner and colliding with El, who, with more speed and a lower frame, bowled right over Mike and ended up on top of him.

She lifted her head quickly, brusquely brushing the curls away from Mike's eyes.

"What's going on?" she asked, tone the opposite of its usual softness.

Then, her eyes caught the bloody shard of glass in Mike's hand. He gripped it so tight it cut into his palm.

"Hopper," Mike coughed, still unable to get enough air through his crushed windpipe. "Monster," he wheezed.

"What?"

El rose and grabbed Mike by both wrists, hauling him to his feet with help from her mind.

Hopper stalked around the corner of the cabin, flannel shirtsleeve soaked deep red. El took a step back, surveying the situation before her. Clearly, understanding evaded her.

Hopper's eyes landed on her. "Just stay back, El. I'll deal with this. He's not the friend you think he is. Look at what he did he me." He held up his mangled arm, showing where the glass had torn through, leaving a nasty, open gash.

El looked frozen, torn.

"El, no," Mike croaked. "Please. He's — he's—"

A violent, hacking cough erupted from Mike as he tried desperately to clear his airway.

"Monster," Mike finished, pathetically.

Hopper walked toward Mike, gait steady, expression betraying not an ounce of pain even with blood pouring from his arm.

Mike raised his improvised knife, hopeless but ready to go down fighting.

And then, he was stuck. He couldn't even struggle to move. It was as if he had never had the ability to use his muscles at all. He was a statue.

His eyes were still trained forward on Hopper, who appeared to be in a similarly incapacitated state.

El stepped into the space between them, nose already bleeding. She looked back and forth between them.

Her hold was so complete that Mike couldn't even speak.

El looked to Hopper and seemed to release her hold on his vocal chords. "Explain," she said, her voice tear-filled but hard.

"He attacked me, El. I promise I wouldn't try to kill one of your friends for no reason. Kid went into the bathroom. A couple minutes later, I hear the mirror shatter, so I go to see what's up. Asshole was aiming for my neck. I'm lucky I'm still breathing."

El said nothing. Mike watched her, shaking.

This was so screwed up. Hadn't she been through enough?

He promised himself in that moment that he would do everything in his power to make sure El could live a better life than this in the future. A life without death, suffering, monsters.

He wished more than anything that he could hold her in that moment. To tell her that it'd be okay. Even if he didn't know that it would be.

"Why," El began, haltingly, so broken, "did you call me El?"

Hopper's face contorted. "What?" he said.

"I never told you to call me El," she said, venom in her words now. "You call me 'kid.' Sometimes 'Eleven.' Never El."

Mike could see the search in Hopper's eyes, rifling through the database, scrounging for an excuse.

"I heard it from Max," he said. "Geez, El, what's with the interrogation?"

It was quiet. Peaceful, even, as the wind rustled the dry leaves.

"Are you really gonna hurt me?" Hopper asked, soft. "Your dad?"

Oh, he was pulling out the big guns. And worse, it was working. Mike saw El's shoulders crumple. The fight was leaving her.

She spun around to face him. The chill in her eyes stung worse than his throat.

"And you?" she said. "Can *you* explain?"

Mike felt her grip on his facial muscles loosen. He sighed in relief. Thankfully, he quite literally held the answer to this mystery in the palm of his hand.

"The mirror in my hand," Mike said. "Take it, and look at his reflection."

That one seemed to stump El. It wasn't what she'd been expecting.

"What?" she said.

"Please, El," he begged. "Please. Just take it."

She hesitated, but must've seen no reason not to try. She approached him slowly, plucking the glass from his hand. She stood in front of him, eyes on the ground. With effort, she brought her eyes up to meet his. He hated every bit of pain he saw there.

"El, I promise," he said, doing his best not to choke up. "I'd never — I'd never do anything to hurt you. That's not Hopper. That's not your dad. Use the mirror."

She took a deep breath, preparing herself. Turning, she went to Hopper, shoulders held back, head high, steps sure.

Either she wasn't allowing him to speak, or he had nothing to say.

Once in front of the chief, El turned to face Mike. She raised the shard and held it out in front of her.

Mike watched as the horror took hold.

The glass fell and El's hands flew to cover her mouth, stifling a sob. Immediately, she released her hold on Mike, walking to him at a frantic pace.

He ran toward her, reaching her just as she hit her knees. He slid

down to the ground, engulfing her in a hug, rocking her back and forth as she cried into him.

He let her cry until he saw her hold on the Hopper look-alike begin to slip, the creature squirming in his invisible bonds.

"El," he said, apologetic. "You know what you have to do."

She nodded, a heavy, defeated movement.

He helped her to her feet, and they walked, hand in hand, to face the monster together. El found the glass lying on the ground and picked it up. She turned and held it up again, eyes closed.

"I need to see it again," she said. "I need to make sure."

She wrenched her eyelids open, and this time, she didn't run from the grisly image that greeted her. She took a shaky breath. Keeping her eyes on the demon, she flicked her head to the right.

A sharp snap echoed through the woods, bouncing off the trees. Mike watched Hopper's body fall to the ground, a thud felt in the chest like the thump of a kick drum.

El leaned into Mike's chest, the color leaving her face, the life leaving her eyes.

Blood now streaked from both of her nostrils.

I do apologize this took so long. Work has been crazy, and I'm in the middle of transferring to another school for a higher paying job. There's just a lot going on.

Also, this chapter is the longest one yet, and so hard to write. I just didn't know exactly how I wanted to handle it.

Hope you enjoyed it. Let me know what you think.

Thanks for reading!